

Johnson Building
532 Sumner Avenue
Humboldt
Humboldt County
Iowa 50548

HABS No. IA-156

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IDWA
46-HUMB,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS,
HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
HISTORICAL REPORT
(April, 1985)

Johnson Building
532 Sumner Avenue
Humboldt
Humboldt County
Iowa 50548

HABS No. IA-156

Location:

532 Sumner Avenue, Humboldt, Iowa 50548
Lot 8, Block 25 to the Original Town of Humboldt
Southeast corner of the intersection of Sumner
Avenue and 6th Street
Longitude 42° 43' 15" North, Latitude 94° 12' 57"
West
USGS Humboldt Quadrangle (7½ minute series)

Present Owners:

Humboldt Developers Ltd.

Present Occupant:

Vacant

Present Use:

Demolished, Summer of 1985

Significance:

The Johnson Building was constructed in 1898-1899 at the direction of A. B. White, who operated a department store in the building until 1950. The construction date is verified by a completion photograph in the January 4, 1900 issue of the "Humboldt County Independent" and grand-opening advertisements in the October, 1899 issues of the same newspaper. A. B. and Esther White purchased the building site on September 1, 1898 and construction began shortly thereafter. (Also see Historical Context.)

The primary construction material was native limestone blocks quarried from Kelder Quarry located approximately two miles west of the building site and adjacent to the North Fork of the Des Moines River. (In 1985 Kelder Quarry was a part of Sheldon Park, owned and operated by the Humboldt County Conservation Commission.) The blocks were transported down the frozen river to the construction site on horse-drawn sleds.

The stone edifice has been described by the Iowa State Historic Preservation Officer as an excellent example of late 19th Century commercial architecture in the State of Iowa. Stylistically, it is an eclectic combination of Richardsonian Romanesque and Commercial Italianate elements.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of Erection: The Johnson Building was constructed during 1898-1899. The first known photograph appears in the January 4, 1900 issue of the "Humboldt County Independent". (See also Significance:) The structure was first occupied by the A. B. White Store in September, 1899.
2. Architect: W. R. Parsons and Sons Company of Des Moines, Iowa.
3. Original and Subsequent Owners: The building was constructed to the specifications of A. B. and Esther White, who operated a department store in it until 1950. In 1950 Johnson's Department Store rented (and later purchased in 1953) the structure and business inventory of the White Family and continued operation of the department store until 1970. Between 1970 and 1978 the Gibson Discount Store occupied the structure, but the building remained the possession of Johnson's Department Store. A list of owners is:
 - 9/1/98-10/24/53 - A. B. and Esther White
 - 10/24/53-1/28/84 - Johnson's Department Store
 - 1/28/84-present - Humboldt Developers Ltd. (Ronald Sande and Don Jensen)NOTE: Between mid 1950 and 10/24/53 Johnson's Department Store rented from A. B. White.
4. Contractor: The stone blocks were cut from the quarry, transported to the site, and laid under the direction of the following:
 - Charles Anderson
 - Chris Christiansen
 - George Anderson
 - Oscar AndersonThe source of the stone was Kelder Quarry located approximately two miles west of the building site in what is currently known as Sheldon Park.
5. Original Plans and Construction: Copies of the architectural plans and construction photographs are not available. Selected post construction photographs are available at the Humboldt Public Library. The local newspaper did not publish construction photographs, but the "Humboldt County Independent" published a post construction photograph on January 4, 1900. (A photocopy is attached to this report.)

6. Alterations and additions: A comparison of 1900 and 1985 photographs reveal few exterior alterations. Three-fourths of the roof-line facade on the west wall had been removed; the marble pillar at the north (primary) entrance had been enclosed by aluminum siding; the north and west store-front wood encased windows had been replaced with aluminum casings, smaller panes, and glass blocks; and the main entrance had been redesigned to close the west access. Local historians indicate that interior alterations were slight and consisted of floor coverings, plumbing, and wall color. It is believed that no walls were relocated.

B. Historical Content:

The Johnson Building's first tenant was a department store operated by the A. B. White family. The two-story stone block structure was built with local labor, had all modern appliances, and in its day was considered the finest building in Humboldt. The White Family operated three departments, each of which functioned independently. The rear of the first floor was occupied by the grocery department and the front by the shoe/dry-goods department. Carpet and draperies occupied the second floor with administrative offices. Bookkeeping and dry goods were found on the mezzanine level at the rear of the first floor. Cashiers of all departments sent money and billings to the bookkeeping section via a cable and container mechanism. The bookkeeper made change and returned the cancelled bill and change to the cashier via the same cable container. This system was unique to the Humboldt Area. The basement was used for storage and housed the central heating plant.

Johnson's Department Store was the second tenant and operated the business in nearly an identical manner as described above, except for the elimination of the grocery department.

The third and final tenant, Gibson's Discount Store, utilized only the first floor and mezzanine space.

The A. B. White family became eminently successful through operation of their general store. The business was considered the most successful not only in Humboldt but also over a vast Northwest Iowa trade area. Mr. White was a pioneer in the art of quantity purchasing and the use of extensive advertising in local and area media.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statements:

1. Architectural Character: The Johnson Building is a combination of Richardson Romanesque and Commercial Italianate architecture. Being constructed

of native limestone makes it common to Humboldt County, but unique to a wider geographic area. The building was constructed during a single period of time during the winter of 1898 and the spring of 1899. Few modifications are noted.

A unique architectural feature to the Humboldt area was the second floor corner turret. The building was approximately the same height as a majority of the other downtown commercial structures, but unlike its neighbors the second floor was used for retail purposes rather than residential habitation. The exterior color was a sandy-yellow with purple stones outlining windows, archways, and trim. The store front windows and entrances were modernized with the use of aluminum siding, aluminum window frames, glass blocks, and aluminum door frames.

2. Condition of Fabric: The exterior block masonry was sound except for a large crack and bowing of the West wall adjacent to the entrance to the second floor stairway. Interiors had been neglected and some decorations removed prior to demolition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions: The Johnson Building was located on a rectangular lot that measured 41.25 feet east-west and 165.0 feet north-south. The building extended to all lot lines. The north lot line bordered the south line of Sumner Avenue and the west lot line bordered the east line of 6th Street. A public alley bordered the south lot line.
2. Foundation: The Johnson Building's basement was excavated into native limestone which also formed foundation walls. Where the limestone did not match the surface the foundation was supported by blocks from Kelder Quarry.
3. Walls:
 - a) North Elevation - The first floor contained a single door entrance and two large windows. Each was highlighted by decorative purple blocks. The second floor contained seven windows, each highlighted by purple block arches. A distinctive corner turret extended slightly above and below the second floor level. A decorative cornice lined the top of the wall.
 - b) West Elevation - The west wall contained the greatest number of native limestone blocks. First floor openings included two large front display windows (the original west front entrance had been closed through use of aluminum framing and glass panels), five small windows and a door that provide access and light to an enclosed stairway, and a major rear door and accompanying windows. The second story contained eighteen windows, a decorative cornice along the top of the wall, and the corner turret. All windows and most doorways are highlighted by decorative purple stone blocks. The cornice once extended the full length of the wall.

- c) South Elevation - The south elevation was a split-level with the first story extending approximately 45 feet beyond the south end of the second story. The first story elevation is broken by four small windows, two doorways, and a large closed-in area that once was an entrance for loading/unloading. The first floor wall was constructed of native limestone blocks, but contained no decorative features. The second story's south wall contained six windows set in a wall of rough-cut limestone blocks with a plaster exterior. The windows were arched, but no decorative features existed.
 - d) East Elevation - The east wall was made of rough-cut native blocks and formed a common wall with an adjacent building. The east wall contained several windows that were blocked-in when the adjacent building was constructed.
4. Structural System-Framing: The north, south and west walls were double limestone block construction. The interior row of blocks were rough-cut and contained no decorative features, as contrasted with the precision cut exterior row that had beveled edges and uniform chipped surfaces. The east wall was single block construction. All floors and the roof were supported by 2"x12" stringers 16" O.C. anchored into the east and west block walls.
 5. Chimney: A chimney was located within the building and was not easily visible from street level.
 6. Openings:
 - a) Doorways and doors - Main entrances on the northwest corner and southwest corner accommodated the general public. Each of these entrances were outlined by either stone arches or border blocks. The original construction was modified as one-half of the front entrance was glassed-in and the back entrance was covered with plywood. Entrance to the second floor was gained through a small wooden door at a mid-point in the west wall. An enclosed interior stairway led to the second floor. The building had two small auxiliary service doors at the rear of the building.
 - b) Windows: The store-front windows were reconstructed to reduce the glass area and glass blocks were used as a decorative feature. Aluminum framing replaced the original wood casings. The decorative second floor windows were double hung wood sash accented by decorative stone arches. Five smaller, but similarly constructed windows, provided light to the second floor stairway. Windows over the southwest entrance and on the south wall were of single pane wood casement construction.
 7. Roof:
 - a) Shape, covering - The roof was a flat structure that sloped from north to south. A tar and gravel sealant provided waterproofing. Gutters along the south edge channeled storm water to the ground.

- b) Cornice - A decorative shaped metal cornice ran the full length of the north and west walls.
- c) Turret - The corner turret was designed as a decorative feature and was unique to the Humboldt area. The unit was constructed of shaped metal and wood. Eight double-hung wood casement windows were arranged in a four over four pattern.

C. Description of Interior: (See floor plan drawings in attached materials)

1. Floor Plans: Basement - This floor was divided into a large open area with a smaller northern section partitioned by a full wall. Several small storage rooms were located along the south and east walls. Ground Floor - This level was one large open area with a partial wall separating the south one-fourth to form the small area once housing the White Grocery Department. A mezzanine overhung the south one-third of the first floor and was accessible by a stairway along the east wall. Second floor - Two rectangular rooms consumed approximately two-thirds of the second floor area. These rooms, parallel to each other, were flanked on the north by seven and on the south by three smaller rooms. Two of the small rooms contained water closets. The remaining small rooms were used as corporate offices.
2. Stairways: The wood stairway to the mezzanine was attached to the east wall with a hand rail along its inside edge. The second floor wood stairway was constructed within the building but enclosed from the first floor. - a small door in the west wall provided access and five small windows provided light.
3. Flooring: Wood flooring was found on the second floor and wood covered with tiles was found on the first floor. The basement floor was constructed of 2"x4" stringers overlaid by wood.
4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: All first and second floor walls and the second floor ceilings were plaster finished. The first floor ceiling was covered by shaped decorative metal with distinctive curved edges at wall and ceiling junctions. The basement was not finished.
5. Openings: Originally all openings were wood casements, but later construction converted the front and side display windows and the front entrances to aluminum casements.
6. Decorative Features and Trim: Decorative features included the turret, window arches, cornice, and first floor metal ceiling.
7. Hardware: Window latches and hinges were of original construction. An original wood cage, rope controlled elevator operated between the basement and second floor.
8. Mechanical Equipment:
 - a) Heating - Steam heat provided through a central boiler and location registers.
 - b) Lighting - Electrical wires were enclosed in steel tubing and attached to exteriors of walls. The original type of fixtures is not known.

- c) Plumbing - Two second floor bathrooms (water closet and sink) and a first floor sink are documented. None are thought to be original equipment.

D. Site:

1. General Setting and Orientation: The building was constructed to the full width and length of the lot dimensions. The structure had its primary entrance to the north frontage on Sumner Avenue. Secondary entrance was to the west from 6th Street. The rectangular building had its longest dimension north to south.
2. Historic Landscape Design: At one time the Johnson Building was one of four limestone buildings located on the intersection of Sumner Avenue and 6th Street. In 1985 only the building directly west of the Johnson Building's site remains. In 1985 the City of Humboldt contained nine other native limestone structures.
3. Outbuildings: None

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original Architectural Drawings: Not available
- B. Early Views: Humboldt Public Library
Humboldt County Historical Society
- C. Interviews: Mr. Ray Linhart and a large number of local citizens provided information on this project, including the Humboldt County Historical Society and the Humboldt City Council.
- D. Bibliography: ATLAS OF HUMBOLDT COUNTY, Mid-States Atlas Company, 1965.
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"Kosmos", January 28, 1874 - February 16, 1876.
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THE STORY OF THE CITY OF HUMBOLDT, Oliver H. DeGroot, 1963.
- E. Text Preparation: Mid-Iowa Development Association Council of Governments
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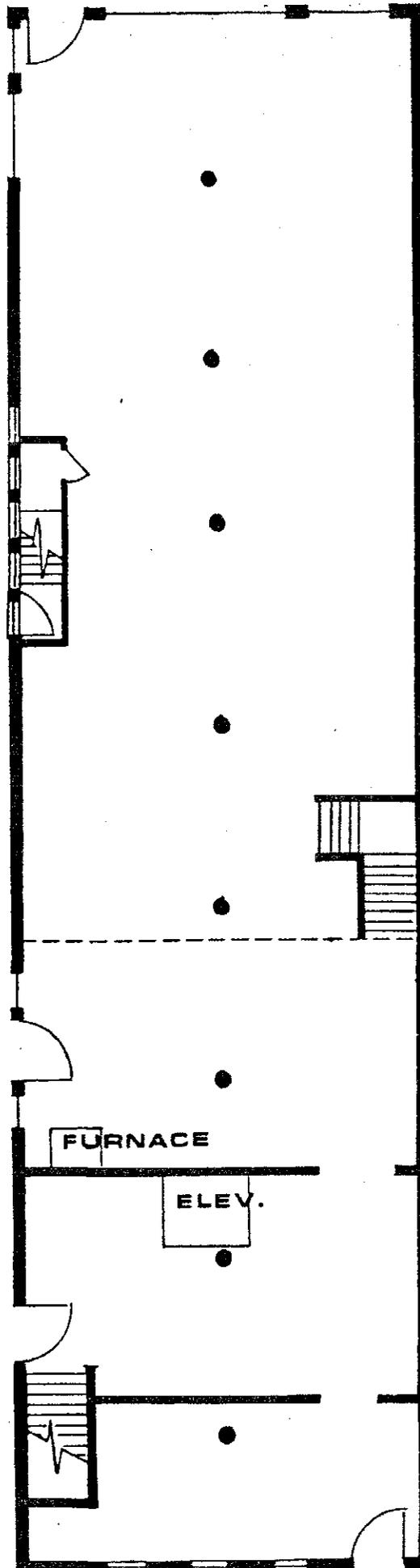
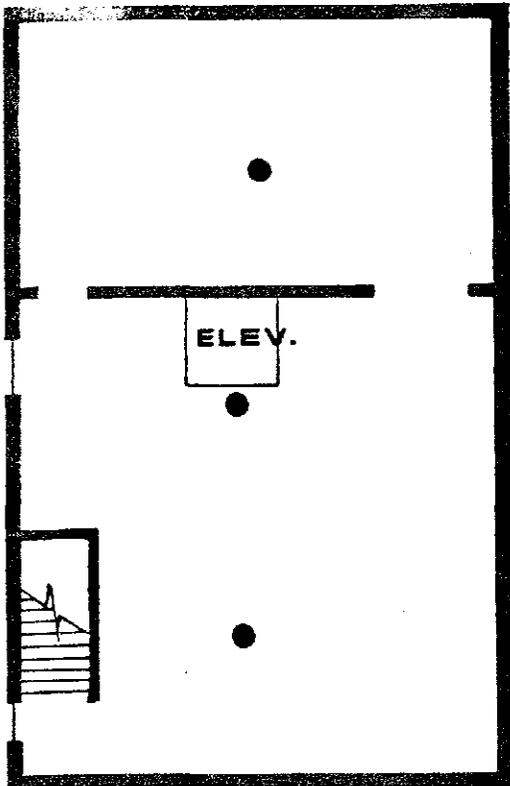
PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken at the direction of the Iowa State Historic Preservation Officer, the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, Humboldt Developers, Ltd., and the City of Humboldt. The project was recorded under the direction of Gregg Kendrick of the National Park Service. Pictures were taken during April of 1985 and recordation research and narrative preparation continued into the summer of 1985. Project photographer was Denny Cox of Saul Studio, 605 Sumner Avenue, Humboldt Iowa.

JOHNSON BUILDING

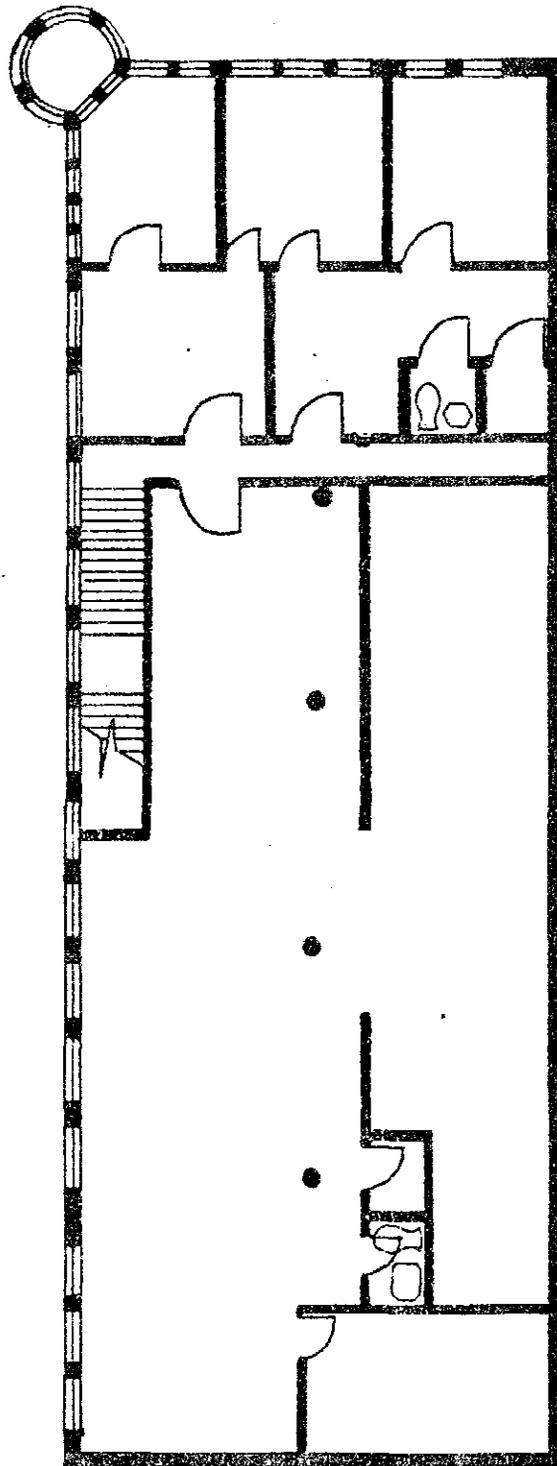
GROUND
FLOOR

Mezanine Level



SCALE: 1"=16'

4-4-1985



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SECOND FLOOR