

Frederick Opocensky House (Thierolf's Rest Home)

HABS No. NE-30

East side of 6th Avenue on the
northwest corner of the intersection
of 6th Avenue and Maple Street

Niobrara
Knox County
Nebraska

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NE-30

FREDERICK OPOCENSKY HOUSE (Thierolf's Rest Home)

- Location: East side of 6th Avenue on the northwest corner of the intersection of 6th Avenue and Maple Street, Niobrara, Knox County, Nebraska.
- USGS Niobrara Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14.579450.4733690.
- Present Owner: United States of America (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District).
- Present Use: Vacant, possibly to be maintained as the Niobrara Historical Society. (Demolished after this documentation was written in 1977).
- Significance: The Opocensky House is significant for both its architectural merit and associative value. In 1885, Frederick Opocensky, a Bohemian immigrant, moved to Niobrara, opened a general merchandise store and immediately became involved in the social and commercial activities of the community. In 1904, he established the Niobrara Brick and Tile Company which later produced the cement brick and tile used in the construction of his house. It was the use of these bricks and tiles in coordination with its elaborate eclectic design that gave the Opocensky residence its uniqueness. The house was the largest, most pretentious home in the small rural community of Niobrara.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The construction of the house was begun in June 1910.
2. Architect: The house was possibly designed by contractor B. F. Spoon, of Omaha, Nebraska.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The unimproved property was purchased by Frederick Opocensky from Allen Bloomfield in 1897 for \$250. It was not until 1910, however, that construction of the house began. The ownership of the house was retained by the family until 1939, although both Mr. and Mrs. Opocensky passed away in 1912-- only five days apart.

In 1936, Othelia Opocensky, Frederick's daughter and a widow, sold the house to Dr. Carl Green (see supplemental material) who lived there and held title until 1945. The residence was then sold to Mr. and Mrs. Carlos Horton who converted the structure into a rest home and maintained it as such for only a short while.

Mrs. Pearl Thierolf took over management of the rest home in 1946 and operated the home until January 1970 with her son Paul A. Thierolf who held title to the property from 1959.

The property was acquired by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1975 by legal action.

The original and subsequent owners of lots 9, 10, 11, block 5 of Starr's Addition to West Niobrara are as follows:

- 1889 Deed July 9, 1889, recorded August 1, 1889, Book K, page 173, James Starr to Allen Bloomfield. For consideration of \$3,000 for numerous properties including lots 10, 11, block 5
- 1897 Deed February 24, 1897, recorded March 8, 1897, Book U, page 450, Allen Bloomfield and wife to Frederick Opocensky. For consideration of \$250
- 1897 Mortgage March 5, 1897, recorded March 9, 1897, Book V, page 486, Frederick Opocensky to Allen Bloomfield. For consideration of \$135 (Release November 27, 1900, recorded December 12, 1900, Book G, page 435)
- 1914 Deed August 21, 1914, recorded August 22, 1914, Book 46, page 42, Frederick Opocensky and wife to Martha Opocensky Jones (daughter). For consideration of \$1,500 for undivided one-fourth interest in lots 9, 10, 11 in block 5
Note: Opocensky and wife both died in 1912 within five days of each other - wife, May 15th and husband May 19th
- 1922 Mortgage October 13, 1922, recorded November 15, 1922, Book 45, page 71, Martha Opocensky, et al to L. A. Dose. For consideration of \$6,000 (payment due on September 1, 1923)

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- 1922 Deed October 13, 1922, recorded January 27, 1923, Book 53, page 486, Martha Opocensky Jones, et al to George Schlender. For consideration of \$7,000 plus assumption of \$6,000 mortgage
- 1923 Deed January 24, 1923, recorded January 27, 1923, Book 54, page 279, George Schlender to Amelia Schlender. For consideration of \$500
- 1923 Lis Pendens March 30, 1923, recorded February 30, 1923, Book 13, page 101, L. A. Dose vs. Martha Opocensky Jones, et al
Notice of foreclosure on mortgage--- \$6,000
- 1925 Sheriff's Deed May 15, 1925, recorded May 18, 1925, Book 54, page 678, John H. Kellogg, Sheriff to L. A. Dose. For consideration of \$5,500
- 1936 Deed May 16, 1936, recorded March 19, 1937, Book 64, page 483, L. A. Dose (husband) to Othelia Opocensky Dose (wife)
- 1939 Deed November 2, 1939, recorded November 22, 1939, Book 67, page 32, Othelia Dose, widow, to Carl R. Green. For consideration of \$1,000
- 1945 Agreement March 2, 1945, recorded August 2, 1948, Book 17, page 310, Carl R. Green to C. B. Horton. For consideration of \$4,000 to be paid in installments
- 1946 Assignment April 2, 1946, recorded August 2, 1948, Book 17, page 311, C. B. Horton to Pearl L. Thierolf. For consideration of \$1,500 plus assumption of remainder due on 1945 agreement
- 1949 Deed May 7, 1949, recorded July 20, 1949, Book 76, page 639, Carl R. Green to Pearl L. Thierolf. For consideration of \$4,000
- 1949 Quit Claim Deed July 26, 1949, recorded September 23, 1949, Book 78, page 37, C. B. Horton to Pearl L. Thierolf. For consideration of \$1.00

- 1949 Affidavit July 6, 1949, recorded December 19, 1950, Book 17, page 616, John D. Blackenfeld to The Public. Quitting title proceeding
- 1949 Affidavit July 6, 1949, Recorded December 19, 1950, Book 17, page 617, Carl R. Green to The Public. Certification of title held by Carl R. Green
- 1959 Agreement July 1, 1959, recorded November 6, 1959, Book 19, page 555, Pearl L. Thierolf widow to Paul A. Thierolf, et al (son). For consideration of \$12,000, to be paid by installations
- 1975 Lis Pendens September 18, 1975, recorded September 19, 1975, Book 25, page 621, United States of America vs. Roy E. Oman, et al. For acquisition of numerous properties

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: B. F. Spoon (possibly the designer of the house), of Omaha, Nebraska, was the contractor in building the house. Charles Melena, as mentioned in a newspaper article, was also a contractor.

Hiram Harding did the interior woodworking. Frank Lambert, of Creighton, Nebraska, painted frescoed interior scenes.

5. Original plan and construction: A few small details which no longer exist are reflected in an old photograph of the house included in the HABS collection. The west (front) porch originally had a concrete balustraded railing enclosure and the entire property was surrounded with rough stone fencing. The following description of the residence's construction was found in the April 6, 1911, Niobrara Tribune:

"Mr. Hiram Harding is doing the woodworking of antique oak . . . all modern equipment, heating, lighting, water supply, and it will be almost possible to do housekeeping by the press of a button. Although each child is grown now, they each have their own room with large closet . . . "

6. Alterations and additions: Such alterations as the fire door at the top of the stairs on the second floor, remains of a fire escape on the south elevation of the second story porch, and a dumbwaiter rising from the kitchen to an upstairs closet opening are all remainders of its rest home days.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Frederick Opocensky was born in Valterice, Bohemia in 1862 and immigrated to Chicago with his parents at the age of ten. In 1885 he came to Niobrara where he established a general merchandise store with his brother Frank, and from that time on was identified with the business interests of the community. He later established an implement house which carried wagons, buggies and harnesses. He operated a bottling works factory, and owned one of the most complete undertaking establishments in this part of Nebraska with branch operations in Monowi and Lynch, Nebraska. In December of 1902, a newspaper article stated:

"A half dozen barrels of Niobrara dirt were shipped to Decatur, Illinois yesterday for the purpose of giving different kinds the proper test for brick making. Frederick Opocensky who is one of the men in Niobrara who dares to venture his money in home industries, will put in a first class plant next spring and set the ball to rolling by another season. He will doubtless erect a big brick structure himself for his rapidly increasing merchandise business." (Niobrara Tribune December 19, 1902.)

In June of 1903, the following appeared in the newspaper:

"As fine a brick as was ever seen in this section of the country is being exhibited by F. Opocensky as a result of samples of Niobrara clay - they are an even, deep, red color, solid and unusual weight averaging 4 1/2 lbs . . . This means Opocensky and Vlasnik will erect a \$7,000 plant here for pressing brick . . . A tile manufactory will also be established and perhaps Portland cement products used in foundations."

Mr. Opocensky did establish the Niobrara Brick and Tile Company which opened in 1904 and in 1909:

"F. Opocensky remodeled the old Holan Blacksmith Shop, put in a new machine and is making cement brick. Mr. Opocensky intends to use this in building his new residence. They are fine looking durable bricks and will be extensively used as cement is the coming building material."

And that Mr. Opocensky did in 1910, creating not only one of the most substantial, but also the most pretentious residence in Niobrara. Mr. Opocensky died in 1912 having lived in the residence only a year.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views:

Photocopy of newly built house, circa 1910. HABS Collection.

Photocopy of front view of house, circa 1930. Included in the HABS collection.

Photocopy of house as a rest house with a fire escape, post 1945. Included in the HABS collection.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska

Interviews:

Mr. Paul Thierolf, August 16, 1977, most recent owner, additions made when it became a rest home, prior uses.

Mr. Harley Eberly, August 15, 1977, resident of Niobrara since 1912, who lived in house after Opocensky's death.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Niobrara Bicentennial Committee. Niobrara Centennial 1856-1956 (updated 1976). Niobrara, Nebraska: Verdigre Eagle, 1976.

Niobrara Pioneer. Newspaper articles, December 19, 1902, June 12, 1903.

Niobrara Tribune. Newspaper articles. June 10, 1909, June 30, 1910, August 11, 1910, April 6, 1911, April 13, 1911, May 23, 1912, September 10, 1936.

D. Supplemental Material:

"Dr. Green has purchased the Opocensky home for possession in 30 days from L. A. Dose. Dr. Green expects to move his family into this fine large home - he will use the second floor rooms (some) for hospital rooms in cases of necessity - he contemplates carrying out a more elaborate hospital plan later." (Niobrara Tribune, September 10, 1936).

Dr. Green did use rooms of the upstairs as a hospital for the most part in maternity cases according to Mr. Thierolf.

Prepared by: Kathryn Burns
Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
Summer 1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Opocensky House is a two-and-a-half story cement brick dwelling with painted brick trim. The decorative details of the house include keystone flat arches over all window and door openings, contrasting light-colored bricks as quoinage on all corners of the house with narrower quoins on the corners of bay windows, and specially manufactured round-cornered brick on porch columns, and door and window jambs. Of particular interest are the contrasting red and tan shingling tiles of the roof. These unique materials used, produced in Mr. Opocensky's own brick and tile company, help to make this structure a truly vernacular building.
2. Condition of fabric: The over-all condition of the house is good. The front porch and roof are in fair condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The two-and-one-half story house, rectangular in shape, measures approximately 50' x 36' with a full basement. The west (front) elevation consists of two window bays; the side elevation three bays.

2. Foundations: The house sits on a poured cement foundation.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The first and second floors are all common bond grey cement bricks with an approximately 2' concrete water table running completely around the structure. Contrasting light grey colored brick is used as quoinage on each corner of the house. Narrower contrasting brick is used on the corners of the bay windows. Specially manufactured rounded-corner bricks are used around door and window jambs and on brick porch columns.
4. Structural system, framing: The structural system is of brick bearing wall construction.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: The west (front) poured concrete porch runs the length of the west elevation and projects approximately eleven feet from the front facade. The hipped porch roof is supported by rounded-corner square columns, widely spaced across the west facade. This porch roof supports a second story balcony of a front bedroom. A gabled roof section extends out over the front entry door (north end) with an applied jigsaw-scroll design exhibited within the gable. This porch area is sheltered by the main hipped roof, extending out and supported by a simple square wooden column. A five-step, poured concrete flight from the ground to the porch level at the entrance is supported on either side by low brick side walls topped with concrete coping.

A rear northeast porch has similar detailing but is smaller and has been enclosed with simple beaded tongue-and-groove panels to create more storage area.
6. Chimneys: The structure has two visible chimneys. One is on the peak of the hipped roof in the center of the structure; another stack projects from the roof in the northeast section of the house.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The northwest front door has a large 2' x 5' rectangular glass panel with surrounding carved molding of stained dark mahogany. The most significant exterior door opening, however, is the second story porch door. A large rectangular upper glass pane on this door is decorated with an applied wood floral pattern above. The lower door has a narrow molded horizontal panel with a

- d. Attic: Stairs to the right of the first-to-second floor staircase leads to the attic. The attic is unfinished with triple one-over-one sash dormer windows on the south and west sides providing natural lighting.
2. Stairways: A central stairwell runs up through the center of the building with the basement to the first floor and consists of dimensional lumber. The first to second floor has an ornate oak staircase-- simple paneled run, with carved wooden seat along the side, plain square balusters, molded grip handrail, and square newel post decorated with an applied design. A second door closes off the wooden staircase leading up to the attic level.
3. Flooring: The first and second floors have original three-inch width hardwood flooring which is covered with patterned linoleum sheeting most likely at the time of its conversion to a rest home. Six-inch width flooring is found in the attic.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls, originally papered or frescoed, have been stripped and are plastered. All woodworking is natural wood with simple molding details. Picture moldings with egg-and-dart detail are found in all rooms.
5. Doorways and doors: Interior doors are horizontally set five-panel doors, naturally stained. All second floor doors have large transom lights above. Paneled pocket doors are found between the living and dining areas.

Note: Exit doors off side porch, rear porch and second floor balcony have had screen and wooden doors reversed so that the screened door was on the inside; said to be a fire precaution measure.

6. Decorative features and trim: The living room fireplace is a cast iron enclosed fireplace with surrounding green glazed tiles. The mantelpiece is a simple heavy wood block with ogee curved bracket supports.

The second floor lavatory has an interesting round porcelain china watertank and a molded rim stool made by Filini Vitroware, Chicago, Illinois.

A dumbwaiter, previously mentioned, was installed in the 1940s - 1950s rising from cellar through the first floor into the second floor bedroom closet.

7. Hardware: A cast iron grate encloses the fireplace stove.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: The heating system was originally coal converted to oil heat prior to 1946. Baseboard registers are found in each room with cold air returns in most rooms.
 - b. Lighting: Incandescent fixtures are found in all rooms, except that halls, living and dining areas have identical chain-hung chandelier fixtures. A fluorescent light is in the kitchen.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces west on Sixth Avenue at the northeast corner of Sixth Avenue and Maple Street.

An original brick driveway existed under the dirt driveway.

Prepared by: Perry Benson
Architect
Historic American Buildings
Survey
Summer 1977
and
Kathryn Burns
Historian
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Niobrara project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in co-operation with the citizens of the Village of Niobrara. The project was funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District, in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of the Gavins Point Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, chief of HABS, the project was completed in the HABS Field Office in Niobrara, Nebraska during the summer of 1977 by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania), project historian Kathryn A. Burns (George Washington University), team foreman Larry Jones (Texas Tech University) and student architects Peter Darlow (McGill University), Lisa Becker (Notre Dame University) and Darl Rastorfer (University of Pennsylvania). The written historical and architectural data was prepared by Kathryn Burns, and edited by Susan McCown, a historian in the HABS office in August 1979. Two exterior photos were taken by Sam Amato in the fall of 1977.