NPS Form 10-900
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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

other names/site number B'nai Israel Synagogue

2. Location

street & number 618 Mynster Street N/A [ ] not for publication

city or town Council Bluffs [ ] vicinity

state Iowa code IA county Pottawattamie code 155 zip code 51501

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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).

Russell J. Sorge, Deputy SHPO, January 22, 2007
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
State or Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

[X] 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 the Keeper Date of Action

Edson H. Beall 3.7.07

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

[X] private
[ ] public-local
[ ] public-State
[ ] public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

[X] building(s)
[ ] district
[ ] site
[ ] structure
[ ] object

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		Total

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19th AND EARLY 20th CENTURY

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls BRICK

roof ASPHALT

other STONE

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

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.)

[X] **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.

[X] **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

[ ] **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

[X] **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

[ ] **B** removed from its original location.

[ ] **C** a birthplace or grave.

[ ] **D** a cemetery.

[ ] **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

[ ] **F** a commemorative property.

[ ] **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

RELIGION

SOCIAL HISTORY

Period of Significance
1931-1956

Significant Dates

1931

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder
Jensen, Jocheis Chris

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:
[X] State Historic Preservation Office
[ ] Other State agency
[ ] Federal agency
[ ] Local government
[ ] University
[ ] Other
Name of repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than 1 acre

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

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	[1]5]	[2]6]1]0]3]9]	[4]5]7]1]8]4]5]
2	[1]5]	[0]0]0]0]0]0]	[0]0]0]0]0]0]0]
3	[1]5]	[0]0]0]0]0]0]	[0]0]0]0]0]0]0]
4	[1]5]	[0]0]0]0]0]0]	[0]0]0]0]0]0]0]

[ ] 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 Leah D. Rogers/Consultant

organization Tallgrass Historians L.C. date January 16, 2007

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 complete form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items
(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name B'nai Israel Synagogue

street & number 618 Mynster Street telephone 712- 322-4705

city or town Council Bluffs state IA zip code 51501

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

Narrative Description

The congregation associated with the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue in Council Bluffs, Iowa, was originally affiliated with Orthodox Judaism, later with Conservative Judaism, and most recently with Reconstructionist Judaism. The building, constructed in 1931, reflects the congregation's orthodox origins in its original design, with later remodeling reflecting the subsequent changes in the congregation's religious outlook and traditions. The 1931 building was built on the site of the original 1904 synagogue, which burned to the ground on March 5, 1930. The new synagogue occupied the same lot on the north side of Mynster Street between N. 6th and N. 7th streets in the City of Council Bluffs, Iowa. The location is one block north of West Broadway, which is the major east-west historic thoroughfare through the city. The synagogue was built in a largely residential neighborhood in the Mynster Addition to the original town plat. This neighborhood was settled early in the town's history and was situated near the main commercial section of town. The nominated property includes the 1931 synagogue building and an attached rear and northeast corner addition that was made to the building in the early 1960s. While the addition is modern in look, its placement at the rear of the main building has had a low impact on the overall integrity of the historic building and does not block the main public views of the historic property. In order to build the 1960s addition, the dwelling on the lot adjacent to the east was torn down. This older dwelling had been purchased in 1936 and remodeled to serve as a dwelling for the rabbi. Today, the synagogue property encompasses two narrow lots. The historic building occupies the west lot, with part of the 1960s addition on the rear of the east lot and extending behind the synagogue and abutting the rear line of the west lot. The rest of the east lot is now a grassy lawn. A concrete sidewalk is across the front of the synagogue. A second sidewalk extends to the north along the east side of the building up to the entryway into the stairwell of the 1960s addition, which provides the interior connection to the historic building. The surrounding neighborhood is rapidly losing a number of historic buildings, with parking lots taking over now-vacant lots. The most recent losses occurred in August 2006, when two older houses to the west of the synagogue were destroyed. There are several older houses still standing to the north, along with a historic apartment building to the northeast. To the south across Mynster is a large open lot where a historic apartment building stood until recently when it was razed to make yet another parking lot. The modern First Christian Church occupies the block to the east.

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was designed by local architect, J. Chris Jensen. It is a two-story rectangular brick building that exhibits a rather eclectic stylistic influence reflecting early twentieth century American movements in commercial and public architecture. However, the design is not a high style example attributable to any one single style of architecture. While exhibiting some classical elements in the simplified form of the entablature and galvanized iron cornice around the parapet and in some of the original interior details, such as the original pedimented design of the Ark and the pilasters, the overall feel of the building's design is one of subdued simplicity and a box-like feel. The building does feature a monumental projecting front entryway that is raised above street level and reached by a wide set of concrete steps leading up to three single doors. Above the doors are two inset panels with the Star of David on a blue background, with the third, central panel being a representation of the tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed in Hebrew with Stars of David above. Brick pilasters with stone caps flank each of the three entry doors and the stepped parapet above the entryway. On the second floor above the projecting entryway are three windows matching the placement of the doors below. These 6/6 double-hung windows with opaque colored glass are original to the construction as are the windows in the basement level on the sides. To either side of the projecting entryway are two additional doors at ground level. Recessed brick panels above these side doors are original to the building's design. The roofline of the building is a stepped parapet with concrete coping on the façade wrapping around both sides of the building.

The cornerstone is on the southeast corner of the building and is the original stone from the earlier synagogue, which burned in 1930. The inscription on the two exposed faces of the stone reads as follows:

C.B.Y.	C.B.Y.
Aug. 10, 1930	June 19, 1904
Council Bluffs, IA	Council Bluffs, IA

The walls of the synagogue are load-bearing brick, with the exterior brick a polychrome rough-cast brick that imparts a deep rich texture to the exterior wall surface. The trim around the doors and windows and the panels on the façade are of stone, while the roofline coping and the front steps are concrete.

In the early 1960s, the congregation decided to expand the existing facilities rather than building new. They hired local architect, I.T. Carrithers, to design a new addition to the historic building. The original concept would have resulted in a modern addition to the front as well as the rear of the building; however, in the end, only the rear addition was constructed. This addition is of concrete block side-wall construction, with curtain walls of metal-framed glass windows in between. The concrete blocks on the side wall portions of the new addition are inset in patterns of five Stars of David on both the exterior and interior walls. The new addition has two levels but is lower in height than the historic building. It is set back to the rear of the building and lot to the point that it has a low impact on the overall integrity of the historic building.

The only other modifications to the exterior of the historic building in the modern era have been the replacement of double sets of windows (two windows over two windows) on the east and west sides, the infill of the center double set of windows, and the replacement of the front doors with solid doors. Originally, the front doors featured glass panes, which had to be replaced for security reasons because the synagogue has been burglarized and vandalized in the modern era.

The interior of the historic building features two floors and a balcony level. The main floor is the sanctuary, which is open to the roof level. A balcony on the south end is reached by a set of stairs leading from the main entry vestibule of the building. Originally, the plan of the sanctuary featured a balcony that wrapped around three sides of the interior on the south, west, and north sides, but only the original south balcony remains in place. The original layout of the main floor had a central podium, or *bema*, from which the Torahs were read and services conducted. The Ark, which holds the Torah scrolls, is a monumental, classical wood-paneled cabinet originally centered on the east wall of the sanctuary. A historic photograph of the original interior shows the seating on the main floor consisting of wooden benches facing east towards the Ark and placed around the central *bema* (see Continuation Sheet page 20). These benches are still used on the main floor of the synagogue but were turned to face north, in two parallel rows separated by a central aisle, during the 1960s interior remodeling. The historic photograph also shows the simplicity of the original interior decoration, with Stars of David used in a stencil pattern on the walls and in carved insets on the ends of the wooden benches.

Traditionally, according to Orthodox Judaism, the men of the congregation sat on the main floor, while the women and children occupied the balcony level. In later years, as the congregation shifted to Conservative Judaism, the women began sitting down on the main floor with the men to the point that the tradition of separation was eventually discontinued altogether. Because of this break with strictly Orthodox traditions, much of the balcony was no longer needed resulting in the decision to remove two-thirds of the balcony during the 1960s remodeling.

When the new addition was made to the synagogue in the early 1960s, the plans also included a remodeling of the interior of the sanctuary and the basement level. The result was the current configuration and design of the interior, which in the

sanctuary involved the moving of the Ark to an angled position in the northeast corner of the sanctuary and the construction of a raised podium or stage across the north end. By repositioning the Ark in the northeast corner, congregants could still essentially face east for certain prayers without having to turn away from the Ark. The original wooden benches were reset in parallel rows on either side of a center aisle and facing north towards the podium and the Ark. The south balcony remained in place, but the other two balconies were completely removed. The seats in the south balcony are the original decorative cast metal and wood theater-type seats with leather padded seats that fold up. A lowered acoustical ceiling was also added during this remodeling along with new light fixtures and decorative wood panels and metal symbols on the main walls of the sanctuary including a stylized Menorah. Along the wood paneling of the west wall are five bronze memorial plaques.

The memorial plaques are *Jahrzeit* (or *Yahrzeit*) plaques and are distinctive of synagogues and temples. "In Judaism, one observes the *Jahrzeit* (death anniversary) of deceased family members" (Gradwohl 2006). Electrified lights next to the names of the deceased on these plaques will be turned on in the particular week when they died, with all lights turned on for certain services and religious holidays. The names of the deceased are read in connection with the reciting of the Kaddish prayer. At Chevra B'nai Yisroel, the plaques in the main sanctuary have individual electric lights that are screwed in to illuminate each name, while the plaques in the basement chapel do not have electric lights. The plaques in the main sanctuary are topped by Menorahs that are also electrified. One of these plaques is shown in a 1954 photograph of the synagogue's interior on the south wall of the main sanctuary (B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954). This plaque had to be moved in more recent years because that section of the south wall now has a double-wide door leading into what is now a library off the front vestibule but was originally the second set of stairs up to the balcony.

The Ark in the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is a classical design featuring dark wood paneling, classical pilasters, and louvered doors, which cover the cabinet where the Torah scrolls are kept behind a velvet portiere. The congregation is blessed with seven Torahs, which escaped some harm when burglars broke into the Ark and stole the silver crowns but left the scrolls behind. Two of the Torahs were saved from the 1904 synagogue when it burned down, with the others acquired through donation. A *Ner Tamid*, or Everlasting Light, is a light fixture hanging on a chain from the ceiling above the Ark. This light symbolizes the eternal presence of God. The Ark cabinet is the original 1931 cabinet but the original triangular pediment was removed from the cabinet when it was moved to the northeast corner of the sanctuary. This pediment was originally plain but had a gilded centered Star of David flanked by gilded Lions of Judah added by the early 1950s (B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954).

The basement level of the historic building originally housed a meeting hall, four school rooms, a men's restroom, a women's restroom, a boiler room, and a fuel room. In the 1960s remodeling, the interior partitions were removed, with a large social hall now occupying most of the basement area along with a large industrial kitchen.

The basement level of the 1960s addition features a chapel that has a smaller wood-paneled Ark that does not permanently contain a Torah but could receive one or more Torahs when services are held in the chapel. A *Ner Tamid* hangs from a chain above the Ark, with a velvet portiere covering the cabinet. Additional memorial plaques on the chapel walls include several original plaques from the synagogue. These original plaques have no electric lights. The blue chairs in the chapel came from the former Jewish Community Center, which was located at 244 S. 8th Street in Council Bluffs. The upper level of the new addition contains the rabbi's office, several class and meeting rooms, restrooms, and a utility room.

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue maintains good integrity despite the 1960s addition and interior remodeling and still imparts a strong sense of time and place of this Jewish synagogue in the City of Council Bluffs. The building retains much of the original exterior material and significant interior components, such as the original Ark, strong evidence of the original design and workmanship details, and maintains its historic association with the older residential neighborhood in which it

was built despite the loss of a number of buildings in the vicinity. In fact, the more that is lost of this historic neighborhood, the more significant the survival of this historic synagogue becomes. This synagogue is also important because it represents a property type that is fast disappearing in the State of Iowa and the region, with the number of standing synagogues, temples and other structures associated with the Jewish religious experience steadily decreasing. The first synagogue in the State of Iowa was built in Keokuk but was torn down in 1957. Likewise, the first Jewish house of worship in Nebraska was also torn down years ago in Omaha. In the late twentieth century and extending to the present day, a number of Jewish congregations have closed entirely including congregations in Fort Dodge, Marshalltown, Ottumwa, Oskaloosa, Centerville, Mason City, and Des Moines. In these cases, the synagogues and temples have either been converted to other uses or have been demolished (Gradwohl 2006).

The current congregation of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is struggling as well but is committed to preserving this historic synagogue. To that end, this nomination is being set forth by the B'nai Israel Congregation to recognize the significance of this building and its place in the Council Bluffs community and also to help preserve this building for future generations. Historical information and photographs were provided by Sandra Kurland of B'nai Israel as well as by the Nebraska Jewish Historical Society of Omaha. Additional insights into the history of the Jewish experience in Iowa were provided by Dr. David Gradwohl, Professor Emeritus, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

Statement of Significance

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is locally significant under Criterion C as a notable example of a public building design by Council Bluffs architect, J. Chris Jensen, and as a well preserved representative of a steadily diminishing number of buildings associated with the Jewish religious experience in the State of Iowa and the Council Bluffs-Omaha region. It is also considered locally significant under Criterion A for the significant association of this building with the historical settlement and evolution of the Jewish religious and ethnic community in the Council Bluffs-Omaha vicinity. The period of significance for the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is from 1931, when the synagogue was built, until 1956, the 50-year mark for National Register consideration. During this period, the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Congregation saw its greatest expansion and success in the community. The synagogue is considered to qualify under Criteria Consideration A as religious property which derives its significance from both its architectural distinction and its historical importance in the Council Bluffs community.

Architectural Significance of the Synagogue

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was designed by local architect, J. Chris Jensen, in a subdued yet somewhat stylish early twentieth century public architectural design. This comparatively small-scale, box-like building is very reminiscent of commercial building designs of the day but also connects with the past in the use of simplified classical elements, particularly in the design of the original interior. Jensen's design for the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was stylish, functional, and practical. Feeling the economic downturn of the Great Depression, the congregation was strapped for funds, so a large new building on a larger site was beyond their means. The comparatively small scale of the building allowed the congregation to use their original site and keep the expense of the new building to a minimum. Jensen's design for this synagogue successfully adapted to the constraints of the lot and provided ample interior space for the congregation's immediate needs. The design and size worked for another 30 years before the needs of the growing and changing congregation and a desire for modernization resulted in the early 1960s addition and remodeling of the interior. In the process, however, Jensen's original exterior design was left largely intact. As a result, the building today still imparts a strong sense of time and place and remains a landmark in the neighborhood.

While the design of synagogues was never as codified as that for Christian churches, the design often followed certain principles of the faith. One of the major principles was that of simplicity, with graven images prohibited. Typically, there is not a great deal of religious art in a synagogue "beyond embellishment of the Ark, Menorahs, Stars of David, Lions of Judah, [and] perhaps stained glass windows, chandeliers, or detailing, which emphasizes architectural elements" (Gradwohl 2006). The design of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue on both the exterior and interior certainly adheres to this principle of simplicity.

In general, the synagogue represents a temporary replacement of the original Temple built in Jerusalem by King Solomon and destroyed and rebuilt in several incarnations before being destroyed by the Romans. The synagogue has never been defined in architectural terms and requires only an "an enclosed space to allow a congregation to assemble for worship and to hear the reading of the Torah (Five Books of Moses)" (Gruber 2003:15). The main constraints on the interior design of a synagogue are the Ark, which is a cabinet that holds the Torah scrolls, and a *bema* (or *bimah*), which is raised podium or platform for the reading of the Torah (the *Pentateuch*, or the first Five Books of Moses of the Hebrew Bible), the *Haftarah* (a text selected from the Prophets, or the *Nevi'im,* from the Hebrew Bible), and sometimes the *Ketuvim* (11 books, including Psalms and Proverbs, which represent the third and final section of the Hebrew Bible). Orthodox congregations also required a *mechitzah* (or *mechitza*), which is a physical divider or partition to separate the women and children from the men. Balconies could serve as a *mechitzah*, with the men sitting on the main floor.

Tradition held that the *bema* would be located in the center of the sanctuary facing the Ark, with seating arranged to also face the Ark (Gradwohl 2006; Gruber 2003:15). "It became accepted practice to place the Ark against the wall that faces Jerusalem," which in this country would mean the Ark would typically be located on the east wall of the synagogue (Gruber 2003:17). In addition, while seating arrangements could vary, "worshippers almost always face the Ark (and hence Jerusalem) while praying (ibid.).

> The Ark is traditionally rectangular and made of wood, but it can be any size, shape or material....The *bimah* can be a simple table, but it is usually more elaborate raised platform with a table, sometimes covered by a canopy of fabric, metal or wood. The synagogue can contain other elements, too. These include decorative and symbolic lights, including an eternal light (*Ner tamid*) that stands before the Ark, and menorahs (seven-branched candelabra that recall the Menorah in the Jerusalem Temple).
>
> Over time, a series of liturgical, architectural, and artistic solutions centered on the Ark and *bimah* have been adopted, creating arrangements that are immediately recognizable and quintessentially Jewish. Three basic spatial patterns dominate. In the Sephardic tradition, Ark and *bimah* are often placed at opposite ends of the room, and the congregation faces the axis between them. Congregants turn their heads from one to the other, as if the two furnishings were in dialogue. This is the form adopted by the earliest American congregations and still found at the established synagogues of congregations such as New York's Shearith Israel and Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel.
>
> In traditional Ashkenazic (German and East European) synagogues the *bimah* is usually more centrally placed. The Torah reader—but not the rest of the congregation—maintains the dialogue with the Ark. In synagogues built on a centralized plan, such as the wooden synagogues in Poland, the centrally placed *bimah* creates a dynamic where the congregation encircles the reader. This tradition was preferred in the United States by most Eastern European immigrants in their first Orthodox congregations....
>
> Beginning in the nineteenth century, Reform Jews moved the *bimah* to the front of the Congregation immediately before the Ark, often creating a stagelike platform. The result is a more hierarchical arrangement that lends increased 'decorum,' which many nineteenth century European and American Jews sought. In the twentieth century Conservative congregations also mostly moved the *bimah* up front (Gruber 2003:17).

Prior to 1900, American synagogues primarily consisted of a building for prayer, with the Jewish community using other facilities to meet their various administration, educational, social, and social welfare needs. The Jewish Community Center in Council Bluffs is one such example. In the twentieth century, however, congregations increasingly began adding "non-worship facilities such as schools, libraries, offices, kitchens, social halls, gymnasiums, and so on, to their synagogues to attract and serve their members" (Gruber 2003:18). The need for such multi-functional centers "increased as the cohesion of Jewish neighborhoods declined" (ibid.). The design of the 1931 Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue reflected this trend by including school rooms and a large hall in the basement of the synagogue. During the early 1960s remodeling, additional needs were met by the inclusion of a kitchen and social hall in the basement and classrooms and an office in the new addition.

The design of synagogue exteriors had even fewer constraints from one synagogue to the next, with the design in the United States often following popular regional styles and sometimes even styles of neighboring Christian churches, particularly for synagogues built before World War II (Gruber 2003:24; Naumann 2004). One feature that appears to be fairly common to synagogue exterior design, and one seen in the design of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue in Council Bluffs, is the use of tripartite façade division. In some cases, the main entrance is centered on the façade, with the entry flanked by "two sides appearing almost as towers" and marking the location of cloak rooms and office spaces (Naumann 2004:15). In the case of the Council Bluffs synagogue, the tripartite division is expressed in several ways. Specifically, the façade features a projecting main entryway that has three doors, with one door exactly in the center of the façade. This raised set of three doors

is then flanked by lower doors to either side imparting a second tripartite division consisting of the projecting entry (with three doors) and the two lower side entry doors. This subdivision is further emphasized on the upper level of the façade by the set of three windows and the inset panels with the Stars of David and the tablets with the Ten Commandments centered above the main entry doors.

Finally, the interior design of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue in its current configuration compared to its historic configuration reflects the evolution of the congregation from an Orthodox tradition to a Conservative one. Specifically, the removal of the *bema* and its replacement with a platform linking directly to the Ark "is most commonly found in Conservative and Reform synagogues," and the removal of most of the balcony limited seating options primarily to the main floor further reflects the Conservative movement, which allowed all members of the congregation to sit together (Naumann 2004). A Council Bluffs newspaper article from the time even noted that "the new design of the building reflected changes occurring within the synagogue" (Fielding c.1980).

The synagogue appears to be one of only fourteen remaining in the state of Iowa and, as such, is a rare surviving example of an active Jewish synagogue in Iowa.[1] It is also a comparatively well preserved example of an early 1930s synagogue built to serve a growing congregation in the wake of a disastrous fire, which destroyed their first synagogue in the city.

The Architect

The architect who designed the 1931 Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was Jocheis Chris Jensen, more commonly referred to as "J. Chris Jensen," who was born in Nestved, Denmark, in 1873. He immigrated with his family in 1881 and was educated at Council Bluffs High School. He married Sadie Christensen in Council Bluffs in 1893. He appears to have been trained by apprenticeship, having no formal education in architecture. In 1894-95 he worked for architect, Charles Driscoll, in Omaha, Nebraska, and then as an architect and draftsman in San Jose and Oakland, California, from 1895 to 1900, before returning to Council Bluffs and starting his own practice in 1900 (Iowa Press Association 1940:1040; Shank 1999:87; U.S. Population Census 1900). He managed his own contracting firm called Jensen Bros. Co., engaging in both architectural design and construction, with offices located at 305 W. Broadway. In 1918, he was listed as president of the firm. In 1923, he joined the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and was registered by exemption in 1927. Late in his career, Jensen was in partnership with G. Bernard Larson, who took over the practice after Jensen died in the mid 1940s. "Jensen served as a member of the State Board of Architectural Examiners, at times holding office, from 1935, or possibly earlier, until his death" (Shank 1999:87). Other known works of Jensen's in Council Bluffs are the Kontinental Kompound Co. Building constructed c.1911, the Council Bluffs YMCA Building pool and gymnasium addition built in 1931, the Council Bluffs City Hall built in 1938, Thomas Jefferson High School built in 1920-22, and Bloomer Elementary School built in the 1920s-30s. Jensen and his wife, Sadie, lived at 520 Oakland Avenue, a home that he designed and built in the early 1900s on the bluff overlooking the synagogue location.

The Historical Significance of the Synagogue and Jewish Settlement in Council Bluffs

The first Jewish settler in what was then the Iowa Territory was Alexander Levi, who settled in Iowa in 1833 and became the state's first naturalized citizen. In fact, "Iowa is the only state in the Union in which a Jew was the first naturalized citizen" (Gradwohl 2006). Levi was followed by other Jewish settlers, most of who hailed from Germany, France, and Austria/ Bohemia in what was actually the second influx of Jewish settlers to America. Most of these immigrants followed Reform Jewish traditions, which had begun in Germany and France in the early nineteenth century. The first actual influx of Jewish immigrants to America consisted of Spanish (Sephardic) Jews, who immigrated during the colonial period and established synagogues in Philadelphia; New York; Newport, Rhode Island; Charleston, South Carolina; and Savannah, Georgia

[1] The statistic of extant synagogues is taken from Naumann 2004 and may actually have decreased in the past two years.

(Gruber 2003:23). The second influx, which included those who came during Iowa's early settlement period, were part of a "mass emigration to the United States caused by political unrest and economic instability" in Western or Central Europe in the early to mid nineteenth century (ibid.). Among these new immigrants were Jews from Germany, France, and Austria/Bohemia, who immigrated to the United States seeking a better life. They were followed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the third, and by far the largest, wave of Jewish immigration, this time composed of Jews fleeing Eastern Europe, particularly from those territories controlled by tsarist Russia. Most of these Eastern European Jews followed Orthodox Judaism. Later influxes consisted of Jews escaping the growing Holocaust of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and those fleeing persecution in the Soviet Union in the 1970s-80s (Gradwohl 2006).

The majority of Jews who arrived in Iowa in the 1830s-40s were "young, single men, unencumbered by family responsibilities and thus able to travel and roam until they found a suitable livelihood" (Gendler 1968:6). As a result, many of the first Jewish settlers to come to Iowa were peddlers. A number also entered into some form of anchored retail business in order to better adjust to a new community. The majority of these individuals established themselves in areas near forts, such as Fort Madison and Fort Des Moines. As the State of Iowa developed after 1846, Keokuk became the locus of a very successful Jewish community and was the site of Iowa's first synagogue known as B'nai Israel built in 1877. This synagogue was torn down in 1957 (*American Jewish Archives* 1956:80-81; Gradwohl 2006).

The Omaha-Council Bluffs area received a notable number of Jewish settlers during its early settlement period in the 1850-60s, many of whom had emigrated from Germany, Austria, and Bohemia, having escaped from political and economic upheavals in their homelands. "Most of them didn't come directly to Council Bluffs, but had settled in nearby communities first," such as Omaha (B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954). Leopold May was probably the first Jewish settler in Omaha and went into business in 1855 at a time when the population of the city did not exceed 300 persons. He also settled briefly in neighboring Council Bluffs, where he opened a retail clothing store under the name of May & Weil (Gendler 1968:6). Other early Jewish settlers in Council Bluffs were Sol Bloom, A.B. Newman, and Henry Eisman. These first settlers included "merchants, tailors, laborers, junkmen and peddlers...Sol Bloom established a clothing store. A.B. Newman was in dry goods, and Henry Eisman sold general merchandise" (S. Telpner n.d.; Ramsey and Shrier 2006). Others soon followed, including a number who had first settled in the eastern United States, coming out west to Council Bluffs to seek the burgeoning opportunities in this by-then booming town. Among this group of Jewish immigrants to settle in Council Bluffs were H. Mosler, F. Friedman, Simon Eisman, F. Hershberg, A. Goldstein, and L. Harris (*Nonpareil* 1955; Ramsey and Shrier 2002).

In Omaha, the Congregation of Israel, later known as Temple Israel, was established in 1871, and "provided the core of Jewish activities from which other groups would depart to start divergent associations" (Pollack 1989:3). In 1884, this congregation built the first Jewish house of worship in the State of Nebraska. This building is no longer standing.

As noted above, the earliest Jewish settlers in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area were primarily of the Reform Jewish tradition. Beginning in 1881, the first refugees fleeing from the pogroms in Russia began to arrive in the United States and the Omaha/Council Bluffs area. These new immigrants primarily followed Orthodox Jewish traditions and would have a tremendous impact on the Jewish community in both cities. "Their letters to relatives and friends in Europe, extolling the freedom, safety and opportunity available, caused the Jewish population to grow even more" (*Nonpareil* 1955). It also appears that when these refugees landed in New York, they were encouraged to settle out west by Jewish welfare organizations intent on preventing further congestion in the port city. Omaha was among the locations new immigrants were encouraged to consider (Auerbach 1927).

It was with this post-1881 influx of Jewish settlement that the call for an organized congregation in Council Bluffs began; however, the ties with Jewish organizations and congregations in Omaha remained strong throughout the area's history. "The Jewish population of Council Bluffs is, of course, subject to influence of nearby Omaha, and most of its members owe

allegiance to at least one Omaha organization, but there are several Jewish business and professional leaders in Council Bluffs in spite of its proximity to the larger city" (Wolfe 1941:233). At one time there were over 100 Jewish-owned businesses in Council Bluffs, along with a number of professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and politicians, including two who served terms as Mayor of the city.

In 1881, 25 charter members in Council Bluffs established a new congregation: the Congregation of Bikur Cholim. However, the group was so small, they could not afford to build a synagogue. Instead, they rented a small brick building near the Water Works on Main Street. The congregation was Orthodox and did not have a rabbi. However, they were still able to worship in the traditional form led by members of their all-male congregation. Even as this congregation was establishing itself, "shortly afterward, another Jewish group in the city founded a new congregation called Temple Emanuel," or in some texts referred to as the Hebrew Society (Ramsey and Shrier 2006). This Reform group was incorporated in 1882, and along with the Bikur Cholim congregation, was able to purchase "a cemetery east of the city; it was divided into two sections to be used by the reform and traditional Jewish groups" (S. Telpner n.d.). "In the course of time, due to a lack of a sufficient number of members, the [Temple Emanuel] disbanded" and "upon its dissolution, its Sefer Torah and its entire treasury consisting of $900 were given away as a gift to Chevra B'nai Yisroel Congregation," an orthodox congregation established in 1903 (B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954).

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Congregation was organized and incorporated in 1903, with a membership of fourteen men including Isaac Gilinsky, George Whitebrook, M. Frieden, M. Solomon, B. Gilinsky, Samuel Snyder, Moritz Marcus, Julius Katelman, Isaac Cherniss, Enoch Gilinsky, Sam Friedman, Abe Gilinsky, E. Pill, and Boruch Simon. Services were held in rented quarters until a centrally accessible location could be acquired. A lot on the north side of Mynster Street in a largely residential neighborhood near the main commercial area along Broadway was selected. The cornerstone for their first synagogue was laid in 1904 at 618 Mynster Street in northwest Council Bluffs. The original structure was a wood frame building, which had a front-gabled orientation and a distinctive projecting pediment over the raised front entryway. The building cost $6,000 (B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954). Julius Katelman and Moritz Marcus were credited with the success of the building project. Katelman owned a scrap iron business in Council Bluffs, while Marcus owned a clothing store. Because the new synagogue once again lacked the services of a fulltime rabbi, Katelman, Marcus, and other men of the congregation conducted the regular services. However, on the night of March 5, 1930, the congregation stood by helplessly as the synagogue burned to the ground. The estimated loss of the structure amounted to $15,000, and the congregation had only $3,000 in insurance (Ramsey and Shrier 2002:265).

Reportedly, Louis Katelman, upon seeing the fire from his store on Broadway, rushed to the building and scooped up the Torah, sacred scrolls, and other religious items before the building was lost.[2] However, another version of this story has three Jewish women who lived nearby—Mrs. A. Diamond, Miss Rosie Fox, and Mrs. Charles Endelman—entering the burning synagogue to retrieve the Torah and carrying it to safety (Ramsey and Shrier 2002:265). Yet another source--The Golden Book celebrating the synagogue's 50th anniversary--stated that "it was only through great effort by Mrs. Charles Endelman, Morris Grossman, the Katelman brothers, and some non-Jewish neighbors that the 'Sefer Torahs' (scrolls of the law) were saved" (B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954).

During the Great Depression years of the 1930s, a number of Jewish businesses closed in Council Bluffs placing the congregation in financial straits because of the shortfall of the insurance on the building. Despite this, they managed to pull together enough funds to build a new structure on the same site. "A building committee consisting of George Whitebook,

[2] Exhibit on B'nai Israel Synagogue compiled by the Nebraska Jewish Historic Society, Omaha, Nebraska, on display at B'nai Israel Synagogue.

B. Gilinsky, Abe Gilinsky, Morris Hoffman, Dave Fox, and Simon Shyken was elected to handle the building arrangements" (B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954). They hired local architect, J. Chris Jensen to design the new synagogue. Simon Shyken was quoted in the *Nonpareil* on the dedication of the new synagogue that "All of the out-of-town visitors said that we have a fine modern synagogue and a great deal of the credit for that is due to Mr. Jensen, who spent much time in working out the plans" (January 12, 1931, *Nonpareil* article quoted in B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954).

The cornerstone from the 1904 synagogue was salvaged from the ruins, with an inscription for the new synagogue added to the stone. This cornerstone was laid on August 30, 1930, during a ceremony attended by some of the most prestigious "Jews and Christians of Council Bluffs. Mayor Brown of the City addressed the crowd" (S. Telpner n.d.:4). This cornerstone "bore the dates of both buildings – June 19, 1904 for the original building, and on the other side – August 10, 1930, for the laying of the cornerstone of the new building. The cornerstone contains the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* and the *Jewish Morning Journal* of August 10, 1930. In addition, a silver dollar and the names of the congregation members and the members of the building committee are preserved in the stone" (ibid.). The building was completed on January 11, 1931, at a cost of $26,000. It was large enough to seat 500 individuals. The new synagogue was built of brick to avoid the same fate as the old wooden building.

In 1949, Rabbi Louis Leifer was elected rabbi of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel congregation. He served for four years and was succeeded by Rabbi J.A. Wachsmann. A house located next to the synagogue on its east side was purchased in 1936 and was subsequently remodeled in the early 1950s to serve as the rabbi's residence (B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954). This dwelling is no longer standing.

The congregation grew throughout the 1930s to 1960s and "by 1950, there were approximately 175 families" (M. Telpner 2002:267). Most of these families were quite influential within the community. Following World War II, the congregation began to shed some of its Orthodox tradition, following instead the larger Conservative movement in the Jewish faith in the 1950s. Conservative Judaism "remained traditional, but accepted many realities of modern life and incorporated them into its religious and communal practice" (Gruber 2003:24). "Increased use of English in the service, mixed seating, relaxation of Sabbath restrictions on driving to synagogue, and the use of electricity and other conveniences were some of the many changes" of Conservative congregations (ibid.). The idea of the synagogue as a Jewish Center for social, educational, and recreational activities in the Jewish community also caught on during the Conservative movement (ibid.:81).

One of the first Orthodox traditions shed at Chevra B'nai Yisroel was the separation of men and women in the synagogue, with the women and children previously having to occupy the seats in the balcony with the men on the main floor below. The congregation also began holding Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for girls in addition to the traditional Bar Mitzvahs for boys. On November 1953, the change in the congregation also resulted in the change of the official name from Chevra B'nai Yisroel to B'nai Israel (Ramsey and Shrier 2002:265). The name change roughly translates as a change from the Children of Israel Congregation or Society to simply the Children of Israel using the more anglicized version of Israel from the Hebrew "Yisroel."

As the congregation grew, the size of the building became inadequate and in 1962 they hired local architect, I.T. Carrithers, to remodel and enlarge the building. The original plans called for additions to both the rear and front of the building, with only the rear addition actually constructed. The interior remodeling also originally called for a different floor plan in the sanctuary than was finally executed. Carrithers' first design shifted the Ark to the northeast corner from its original location in the center of the east wall and had the main floor seating arranged in a southwest to northeast angle to directly face the new location of the Ark. This design must not have met with approval because Carrithers executed a supplemental plan in August 1963, which called for the Ark to be placed in the northeast corner but the seating to now be in two parallel north-south rows

facing the new stage or platform along the north rear wall of the sanctuary. This change in design also reflects the evolution of the congregation from an Orthodox tradition to one more aligned with the Conservative movement, as noted above. Carrithers' design also removed most of the upper balcony, leaving only the south balcony intact. This removal further reflected the trend away from the Orthodox tradition, as the balcony was now largely unused because the congregation could now all sit together on the main floor. This is the interior sanctuary plan that remains in place to the present day.

However, it was not long after the building was enlarged and remodeled that the size of the congregation began to take a downturn. The last full-time rabbi was Rabbi Karzan in the mid-1960s. With the departure of Rabbi Emil Klein in 1969, the Talmud Torah and the Sunday School were soon closed. By 1980, plans were being proposed to close and auction off the synagogue. However, members of the congregation banded together to save the synagogue by recruiting young families and new members from the area. The objective was to form a congregation more progressive in its religious and social philosophy resulting in even further divergence from the Orthodox beliefs of the past. The new congregation adopted a more contemporary approach to religion. Beginning in 1989, Rabbi Sharon Steifel became the first Reconstructionist part-time rabbi at B'nai Israel. During this period, the congregation experienced a rebirth. Rabbi Steifel was followed by Rabbi Sheryl Shulewitz and later Rabbi Ruth Ehrenstein, but today the congregation is once again without a rabbi and struggles to maintain their numbers and to keep their building intact. At present, the congregation numbers about twenty families.[3] Weekly services are now led by a member of the congregation.

In addition to the individuals noted above, notable members of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Congregation in Council Bluffs have included Dr. Sol Kutler, a local dentist who spent many years doing volunteer dental work overseas where needed; Maynard S. Telpner, a prominent lawyer and community leader, who served as Mayor in 1963; Shirley Gershun Goldstein, who bravely worked in the 1970s to rescue Soviet Jewry from persecution; Norman Cherniss, a noted journalist and sportswriter; Eugene Telpner, influential in journalism, radio and television; Leo Myerson, who founded World Radio in 1935; and Jack Edward Brown, a lawyer and political candidate.[4]

The Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue is one of the best extant representations of Jewish settlement and influence in the Council Bluffs community and southwest Iowa. Many of the commercial buildings once associated with this congregation have been demolished along Broadway. Other buildings associated with Jewish service and social organizations, such as the Jewish Community Center at 244 S. 8th Street are no longer strongly identified in the community with their Jewish history. In fact, the property on S. 8th Street was originally a private home that was later purchased for use as the Jewish Community Center and has since reverted back to a residential function (M. Telpner 2002:267). As a result, the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue has become a lasting and prominent symbol of this Jewish heritage and continues to serve Council Bluffs' Jewish community into the twenty-first century.

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[3] Exhibit on B'nai Israel Synagogue compiled by the Nebraska Jewish Historic Society, Omaha, Nebraska, on display at B'nai Israel Synagogue.

[4] Abraham Lincoln High School Hall of Fame Inductees, list on file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa, and additional information provided by Sandra Kurland of B'nai Israel Synagogue.

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Original blueprints from both the 1930 design by J. Chris Jensen and the early 1960s remodeling and addition by I.T. Carrithers on file at the B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Historical Exhibit on display at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa, compiled by the Nebraska Jewish Historic Society of Omaha, Nebraska.

Historical scrapbooks and photographs compiled by Sandra Kurland on file at the B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Geographical Data

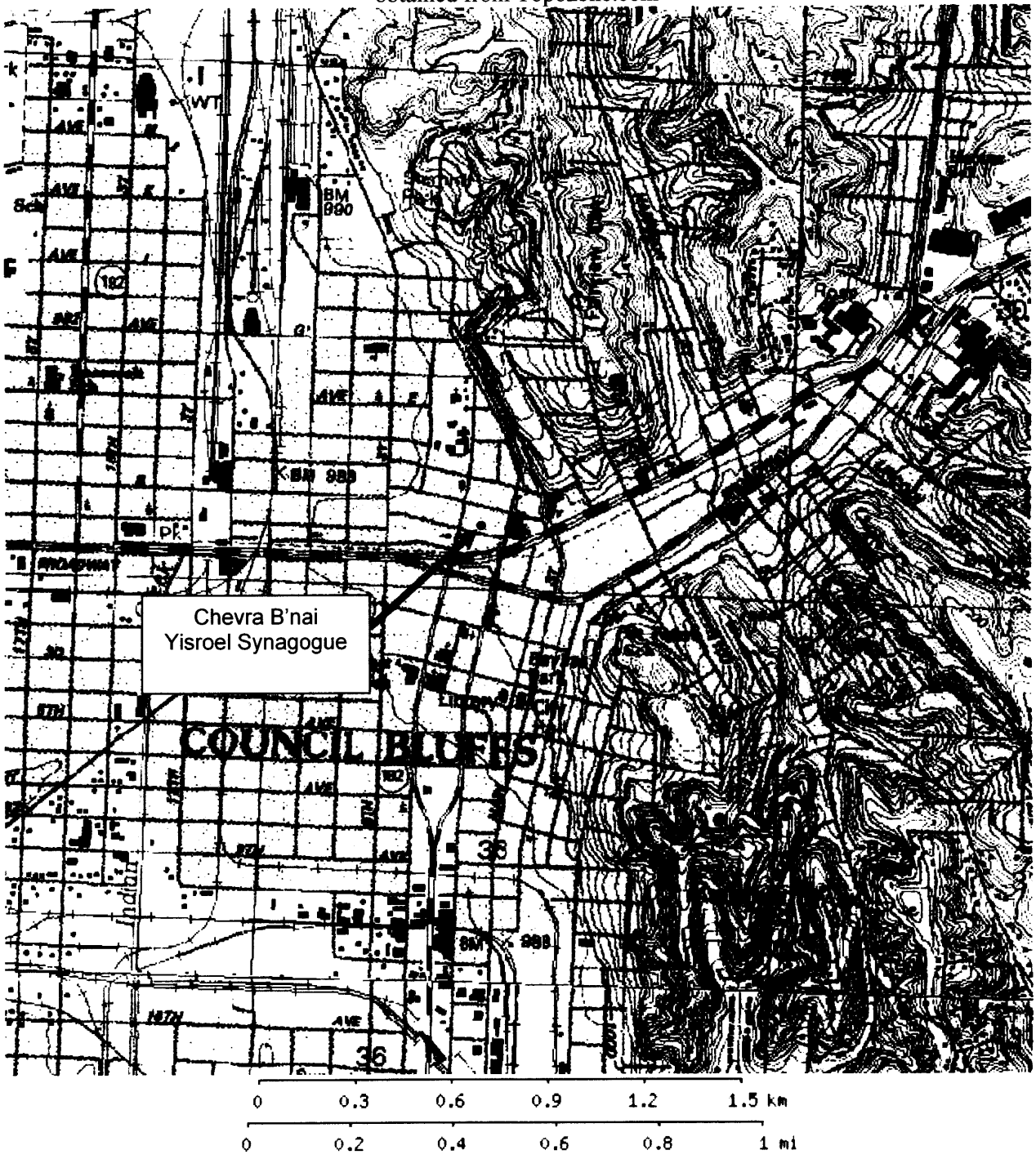
Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue consists of Lot 4 of Block 16 of the Bayliss Addition and Lot 9 of Block 7 of the Mynster Addition to the City of Council Bluffs, Iowa.

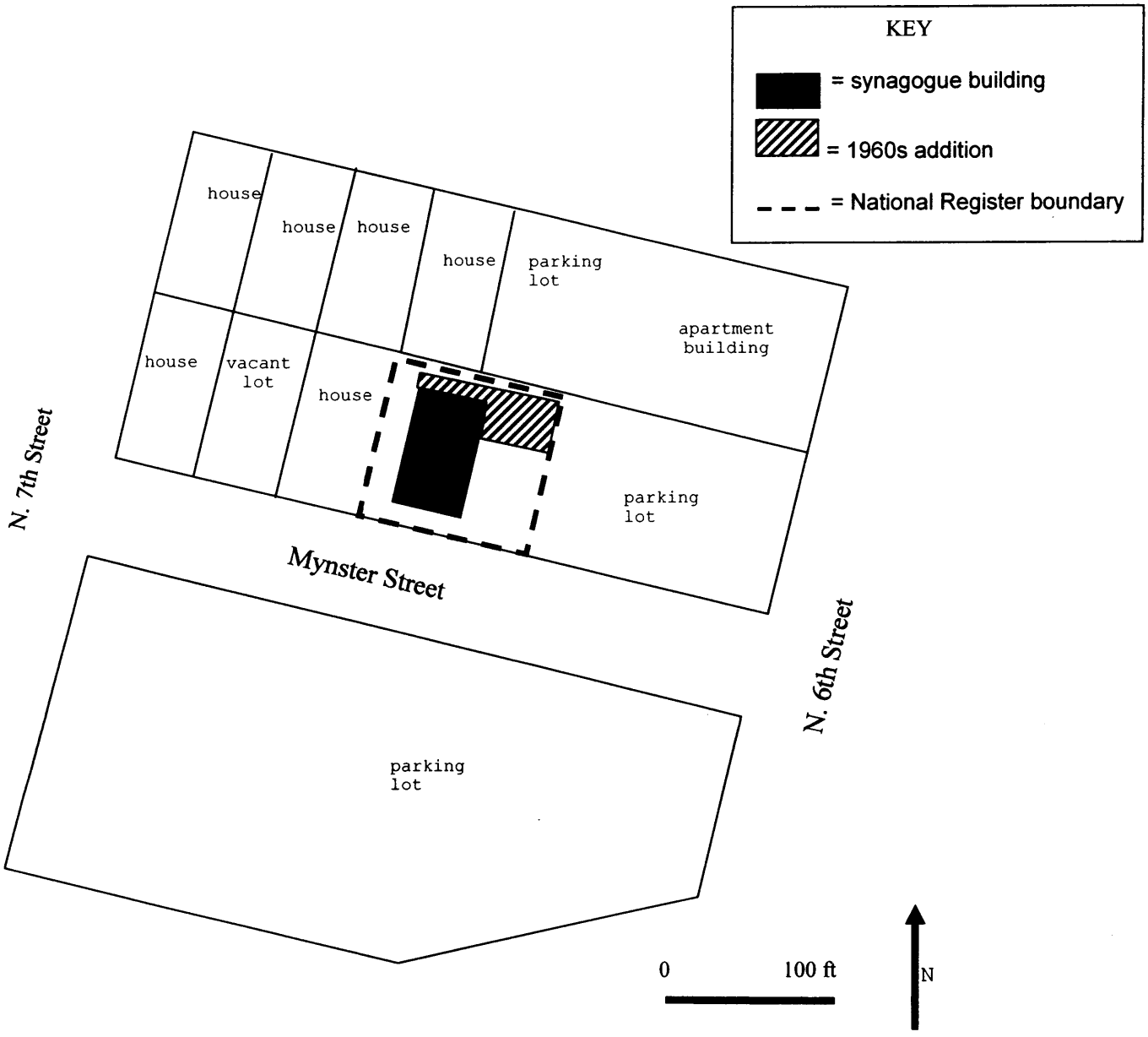
Boundary Justification

The boundary of the nominated property consists of the original lot on which the historic synagogue is built and the adjacent lot on which the 1960s addition was partially built.

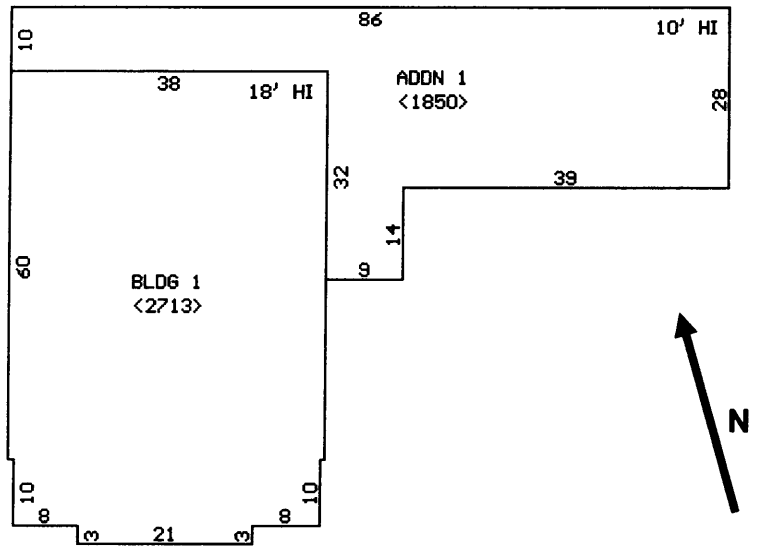
Topographic location of the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue on USGS Council Bluffs North Quad Map obtained from Topozone.com



Site Plan Map



Sketch Map of current Ground Plan showing Synagogue (Building 1) and 1960s addition (ADDN 1) obtained from Pottawattamie County Assessor's website

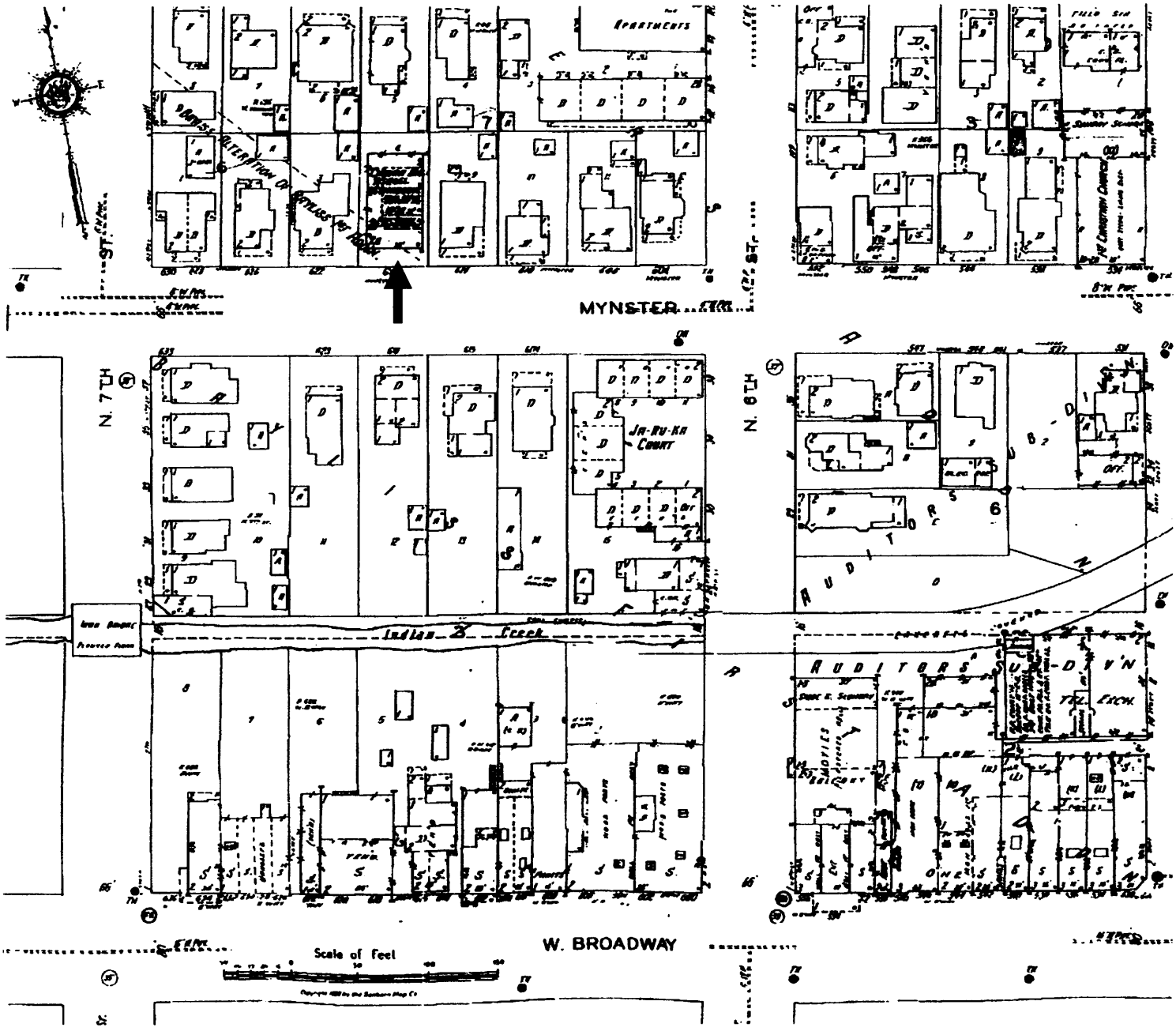


Photograph of 1904 Synagogue at site of current Synagogue
Original photograph from the Omaha Jewish Community Center Archives
Source of Copy: B'nai Israel Synagogue 1954

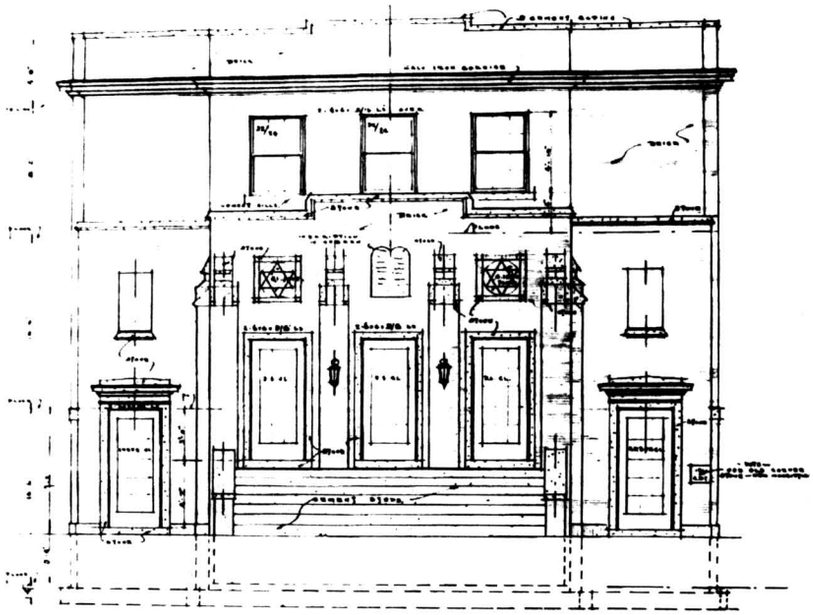
Photograph of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue in the 1930s-40s, View to the NE
Copy provided by the Nebraska Jewish Historical Society, Omaha, Nebraska

Photograph of the original interior of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue, View to the South
Copy of original photograph provided by Sandra Kurland, Council Bluffs, Iowa
[Exact date of photograph is unknown but likely from the 1930s-40s]

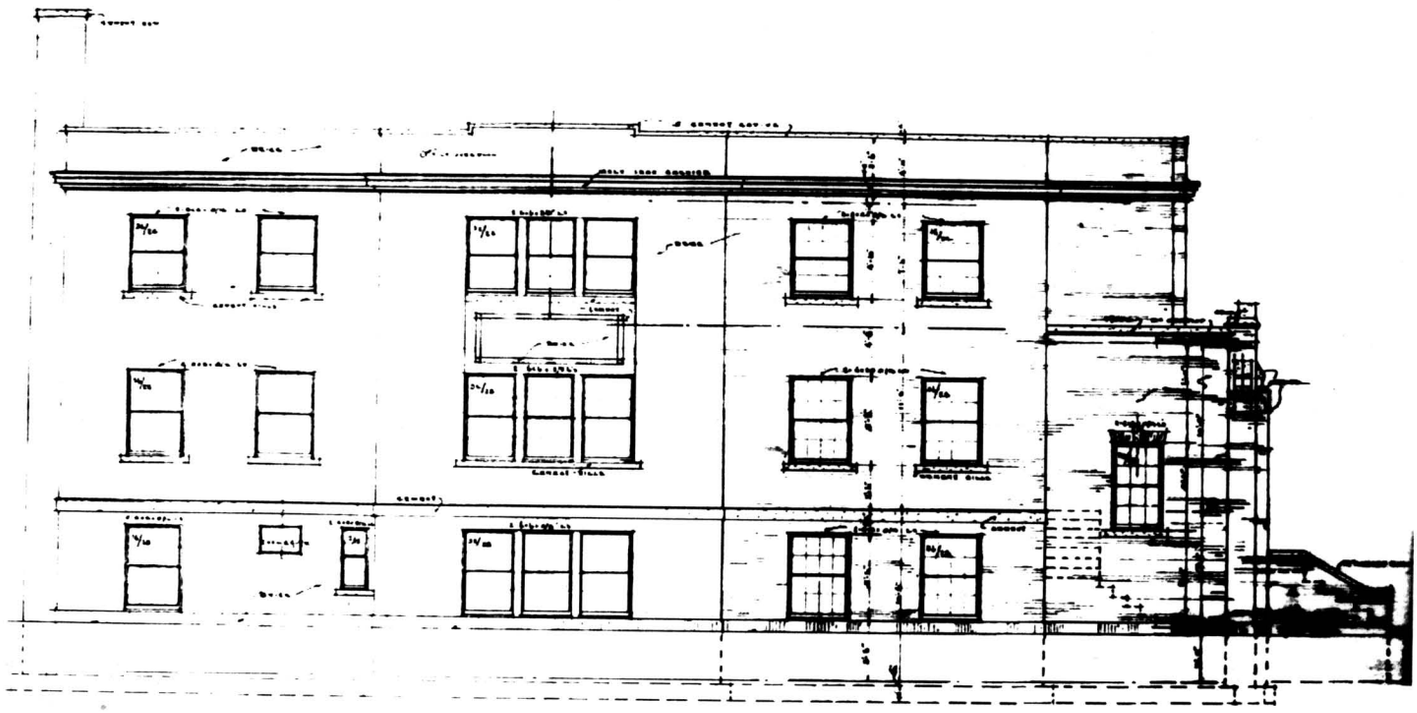
1962 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map showing location of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue



1930 Blueprints of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, J. Chris Jensen
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa

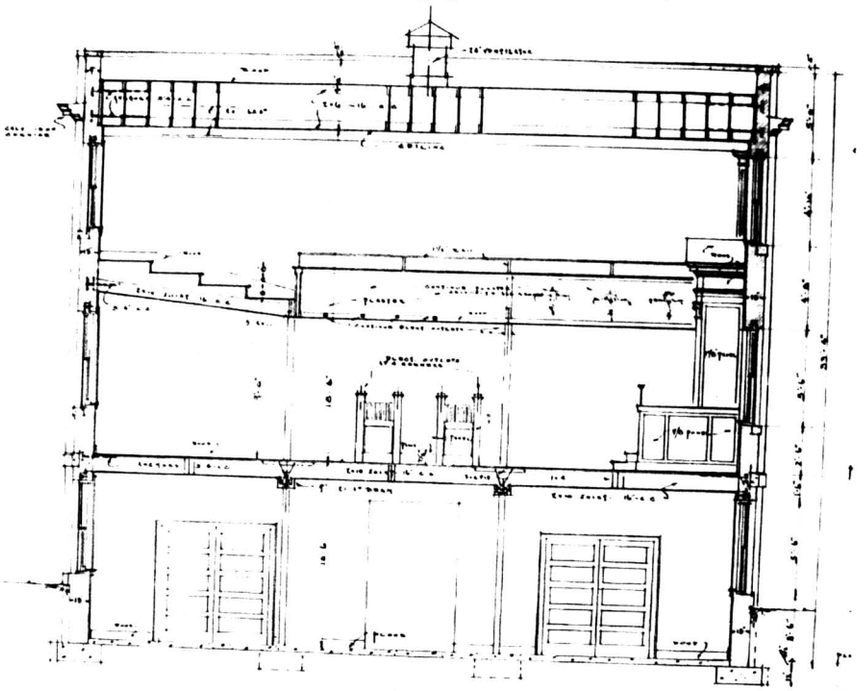


Front (South) Elevation

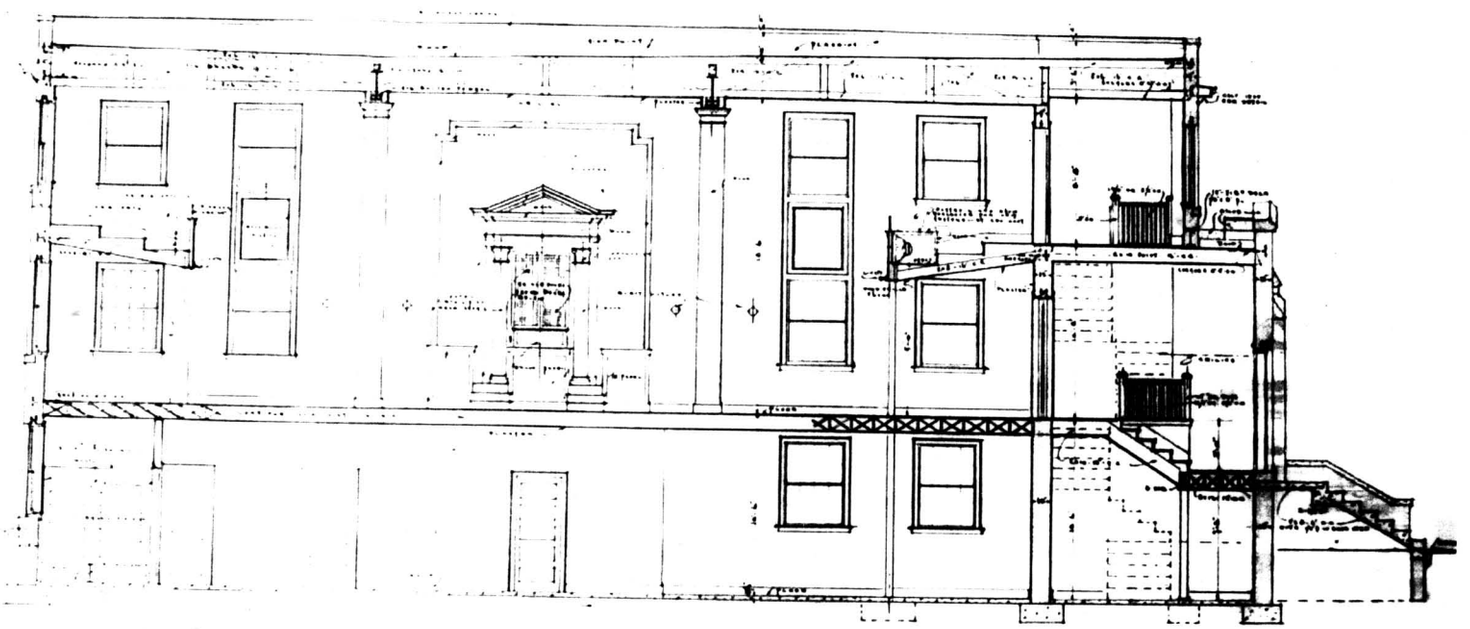


West Elevation

1930 Blueprints of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, J. Chris Jensen
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa

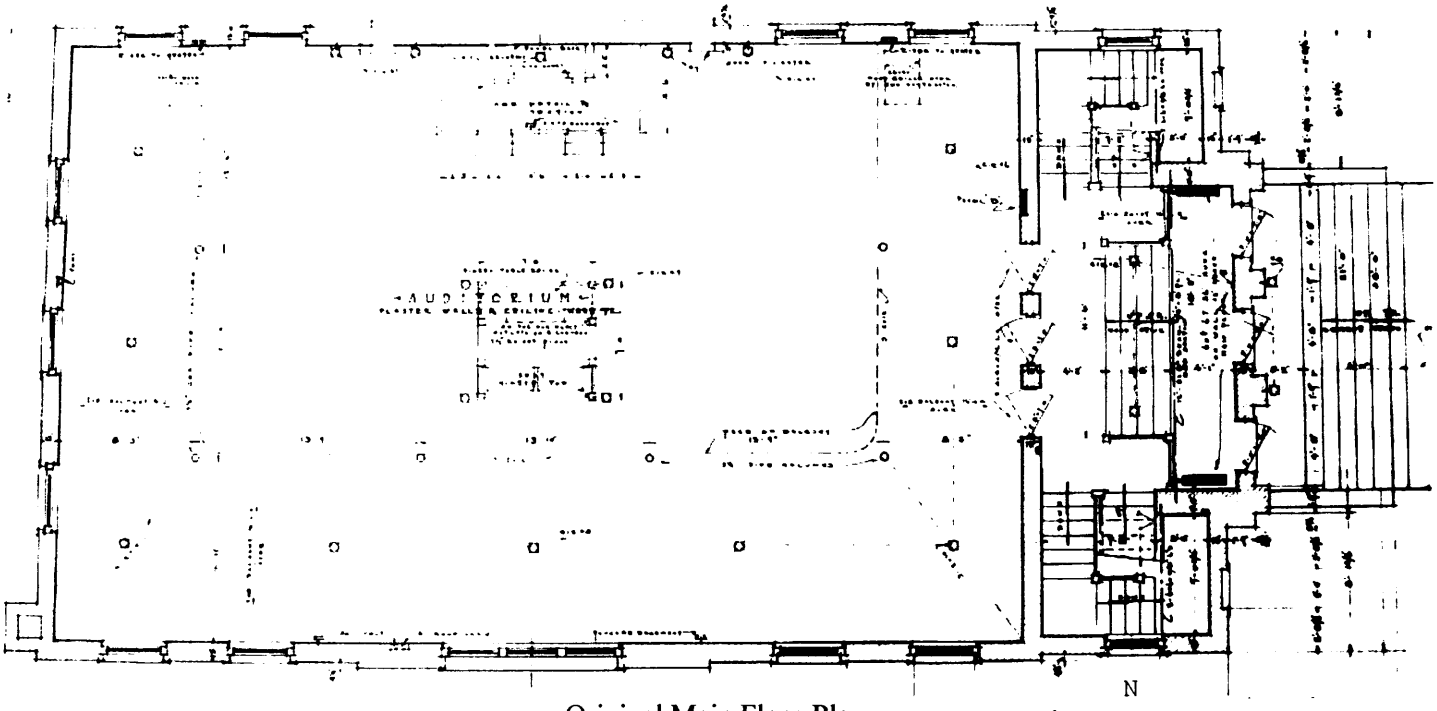


Interior Cross-Section Looking North

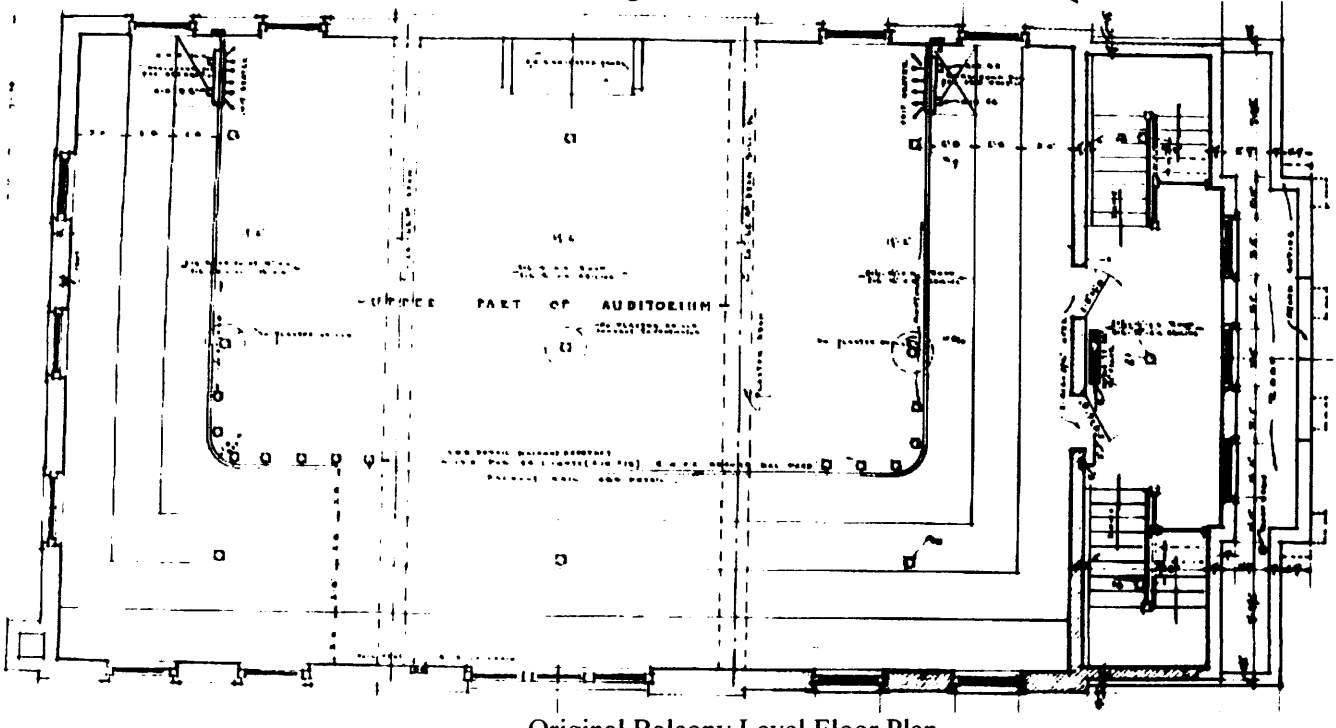


Longitudinal Cross-Section Looking East

1930 Blueprints of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, J. Chris Jensen
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa

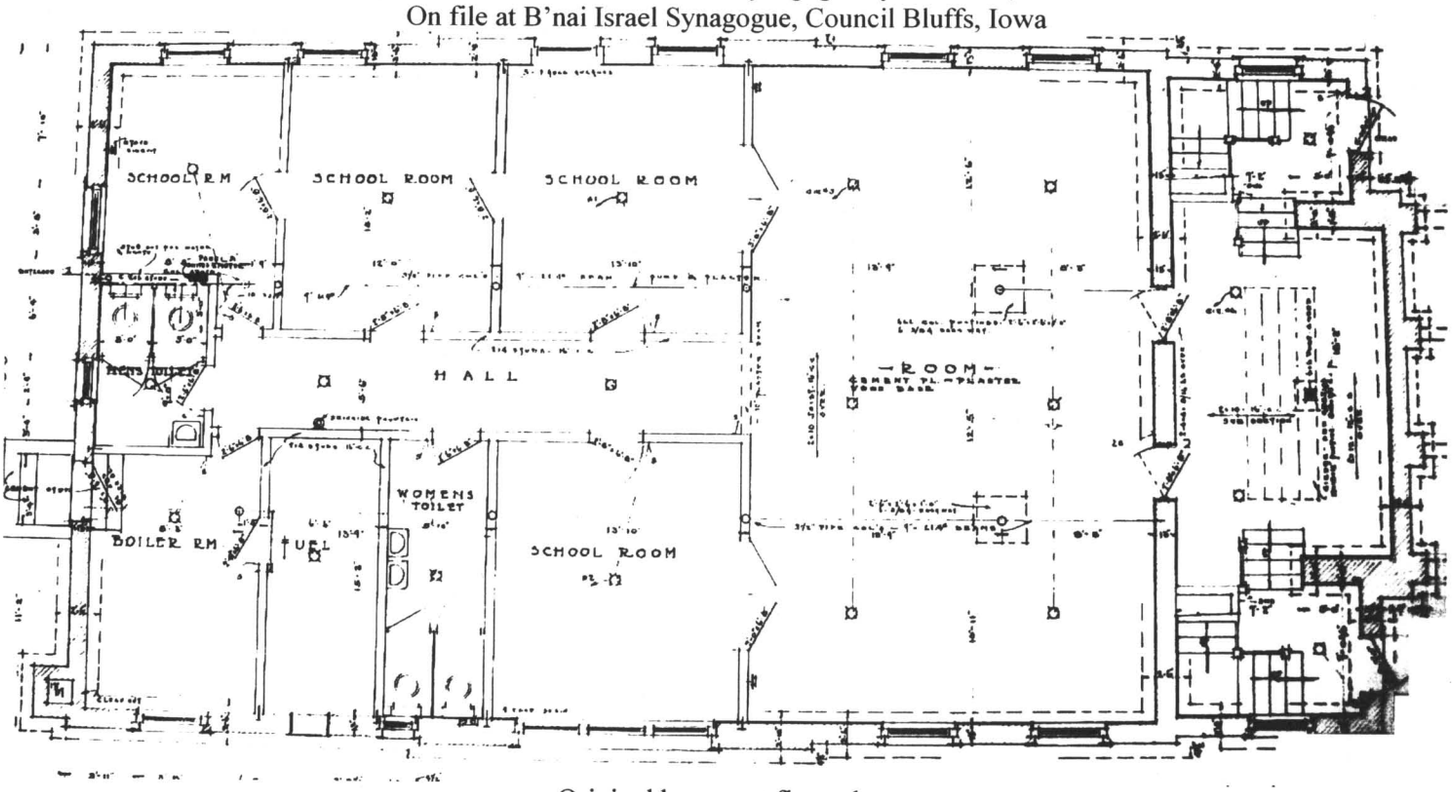


Original Main Floor Plan



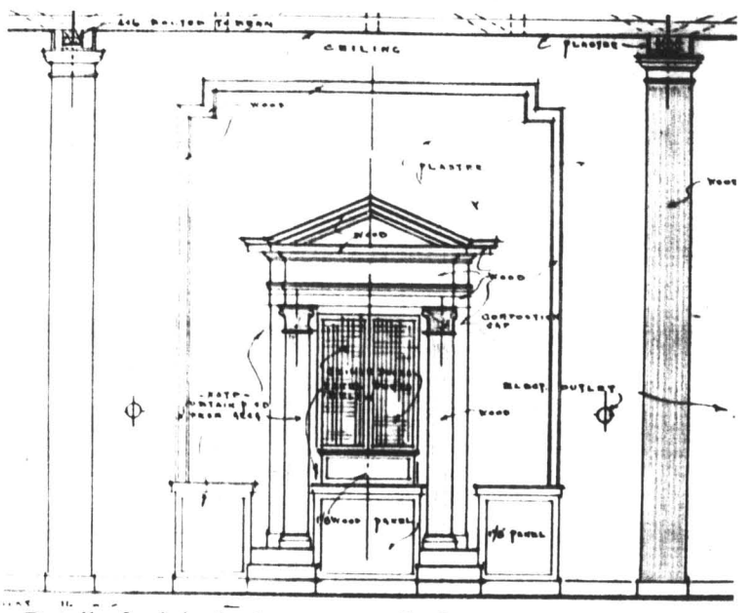
Original Balcony Level Floor Plan

1930 Blueprints of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, J. Chris Jensen
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa



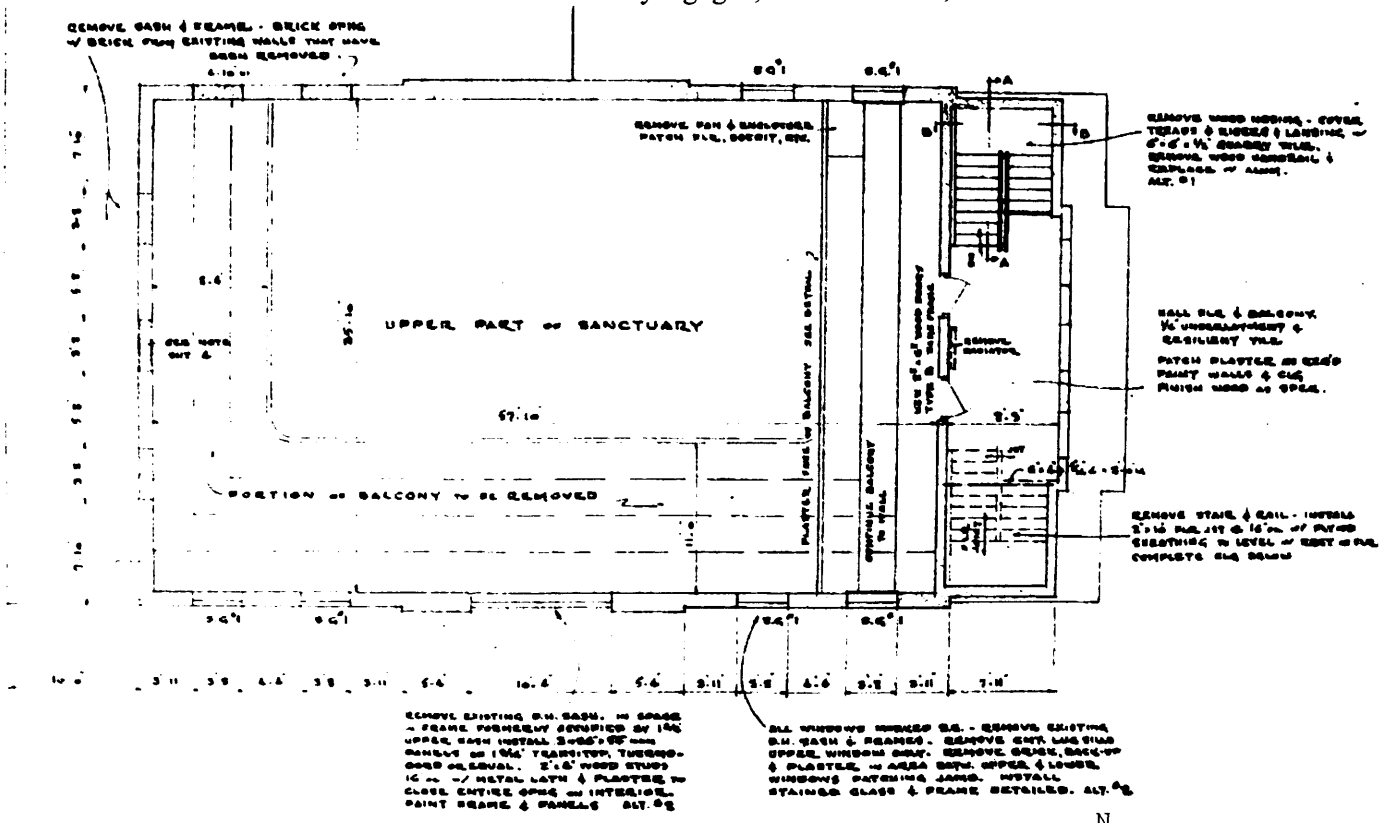
Original basement floor plan

N

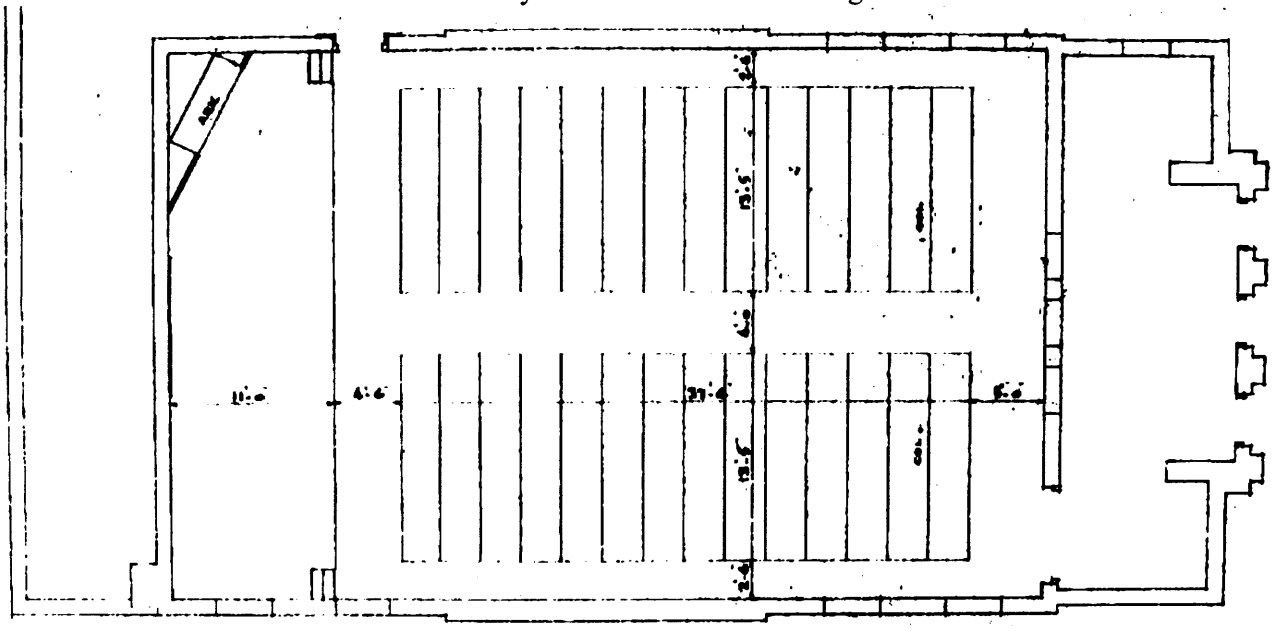


Detail of original ark on east wall of sanctuary looking East

Early 1960s Blueprints of Remodeling of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, I.T. Carrithers
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa

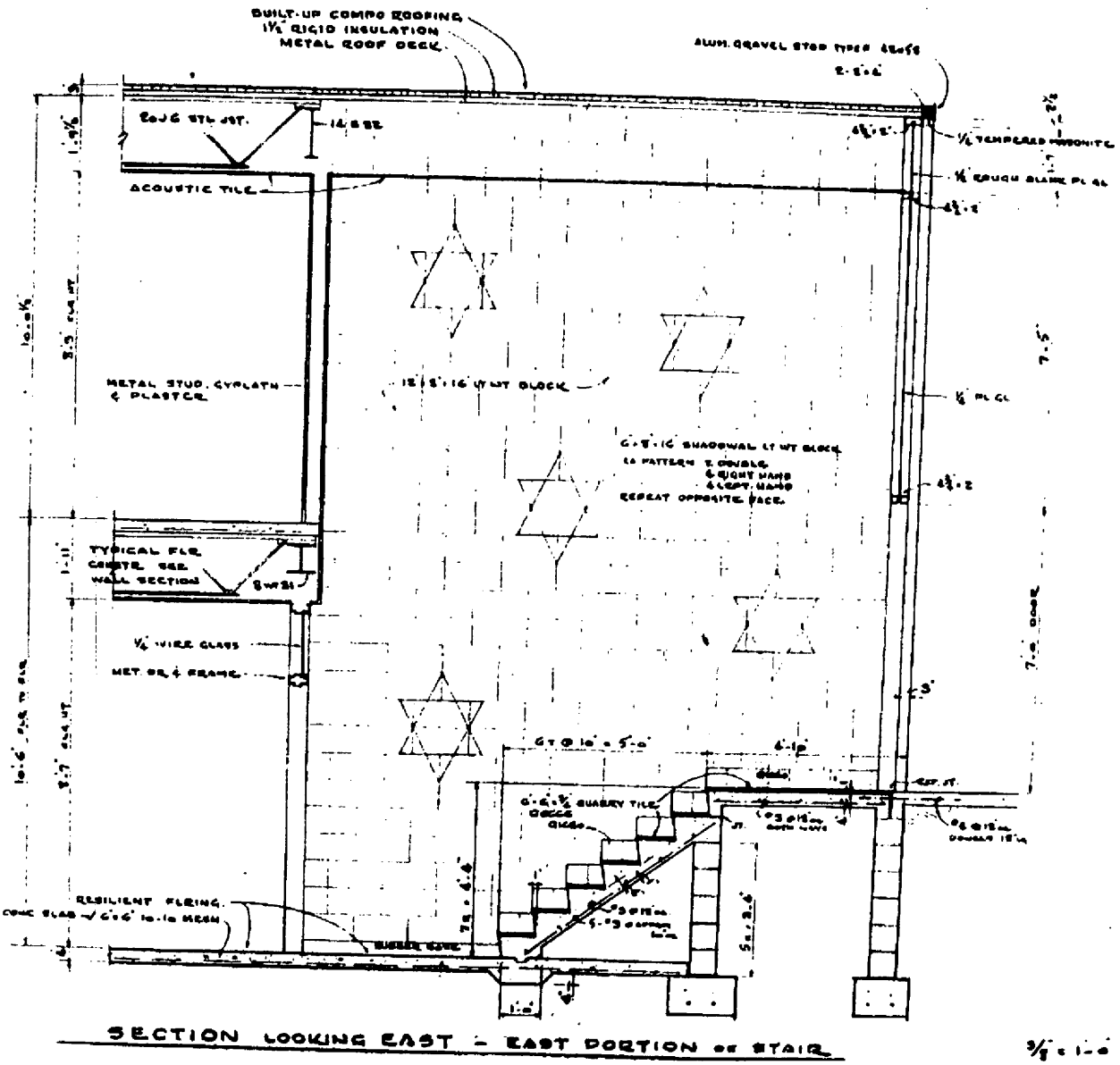


Balcony Level Plan for Remodeling



Final Remodeling Plan for Main Level of Sanctuary. Also Current Configuration of Interior.

Early 1960s Blueprints of Remodeling of Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue by Architect, I.T. Carrithers
On file at B'nai Israel Synagogue, Council Bluffs, Iowa



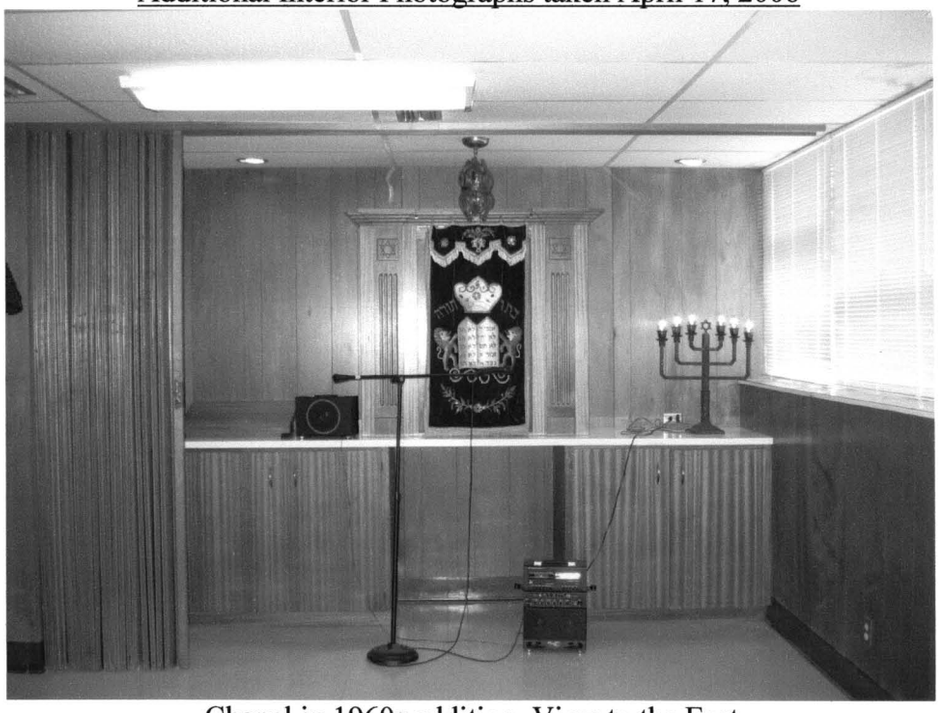
Design for Wall of New Addition showing Star of David pattern looking East

Additional Interior Photographs taken April 17, 2006

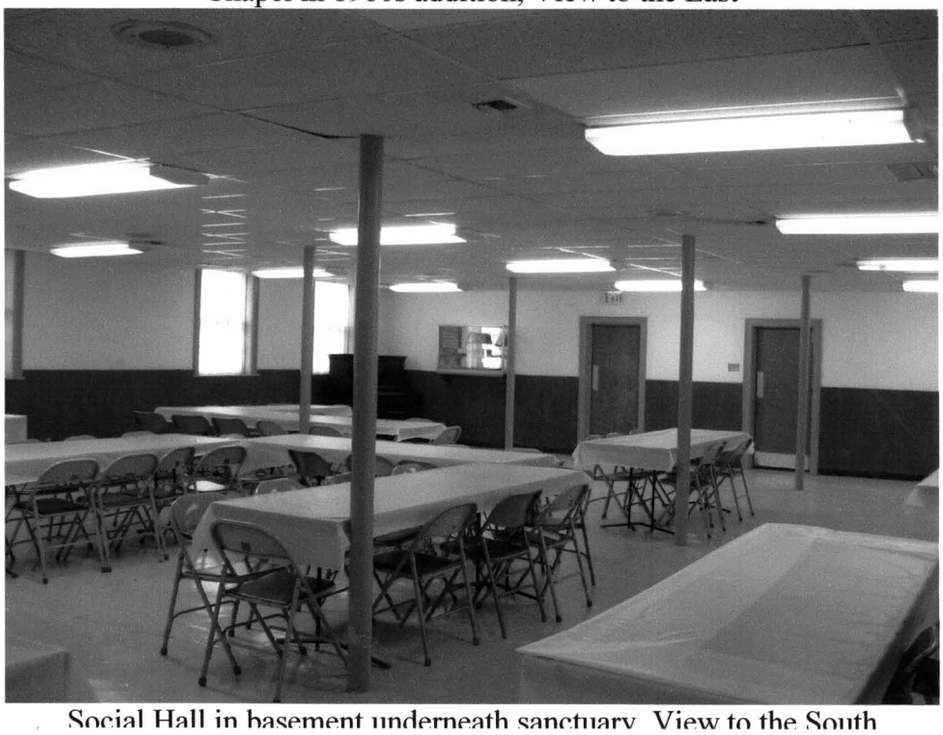
Original 1930 metal-framed seats in south balcony, View to the West

Original wooden benches on main floor of sanctuary, View to the SE

Additional Interior Photographs taken April 17, 2006



Chapel in 1960s addition, View to the East



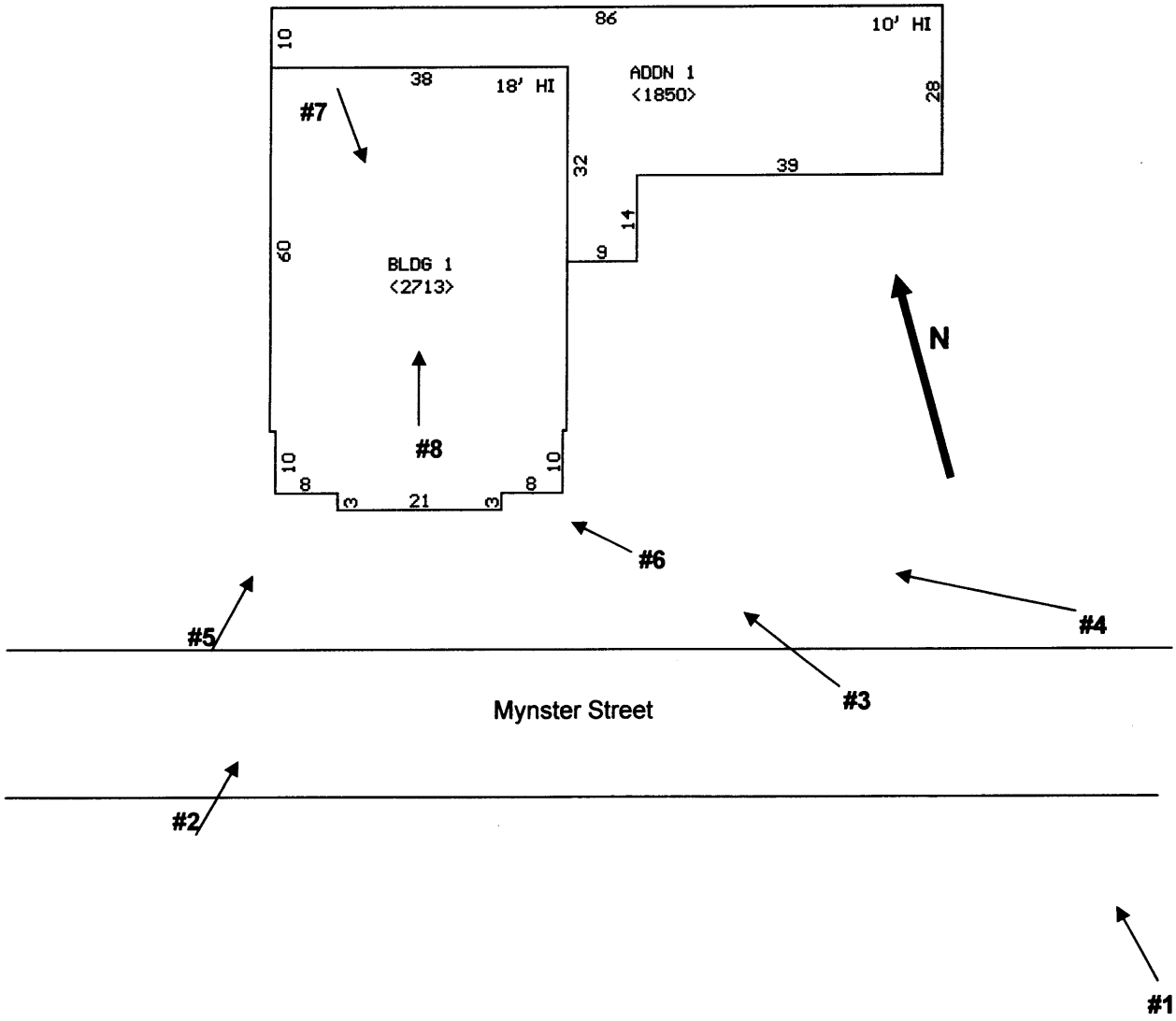
Social Hall in basement underneath sanctuary, View to the South

Photographs

Name of Property: Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue
County and State: Pottawattamie County, IA
Photographer: Leah D. Rogers
Date of Photograph: April 17, 2006
Location of Original Negative: Tallgrass Historians L.C., Iowa City, IA

#1 General view of property, View to the North
#2 General view of property, View to the NE
#3 Synagogue, View to the NW
#4 Synagogue, View to the West
#5 Synagogue, View to the NE
#6 Detail of façade of Synagogue, View to the WNW
#7 Interior of sanctuary, View to the South from podium showing south balcony
#8 Interior of sanctuary, View to the North from balcony with ark doors open showing Torah scrolls

Map Showing Direction of Photographs



#1

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

Pottawattamie County, IA

#2

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

Pottawattamie County, IA

#3

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

Pottawattamie County, IA

#4

Chevra Bnai Yisroel Synagogue
Pottawattamie County, IA

#5

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

Pottawattamie County, IA

#6

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

Pottawattamie County, IA

#7

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

Pottawattamie County, IA

#8

Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue

Pottawattamie County, IA