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Blair House—Washington's Terrace Hill

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THE CITY HALL AT WASHINGTON, IOWA was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. The main part of the structure, called Blair House after one of its early owners, is an outstanding example of Victorian architecture of the 1880-1890 period. William Wagner, a well-known Des Moines architect, has called it a "little gem—a miniature Terrace Hill."

Blair House is one of the few remaining homes in Washington of the Victorian period. Winfield Smouse, a local financier and realtor, hired John Patterson Ruskin to build the brick home in 1880-1881. Most of the material came from Burlington and St. Louis, with the exception of the bricks which were probably made in a local brickyard. There are two imitation marble fireplaces still intact in the house, long windows, carved woodwork and rosettes on the ceilings accent the light fixtures.

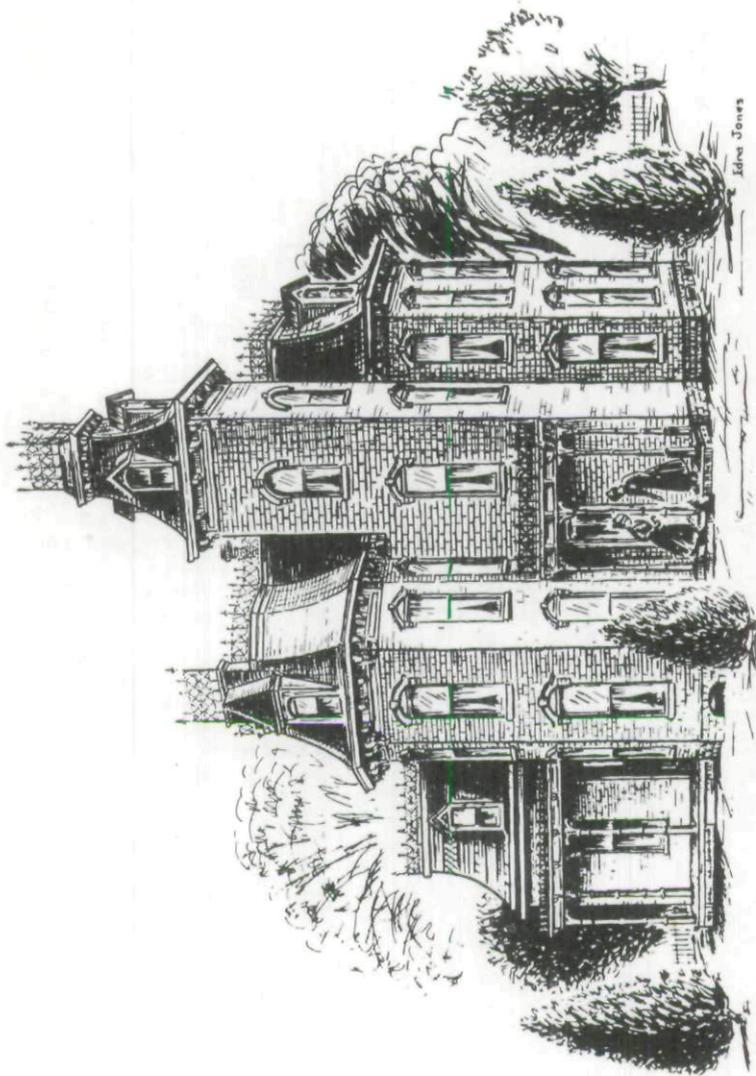
Edwin Blair bought the residence in October of 1882; his widow sold it in 1891. C. J. Wilson owned it for five years until it was purchased by the Washington Commercial Club in 1903. The club immediately added a gymnasium and club rooms on the south side of the house.

Dedication ceremonies on December 23, 1903 included an elaborate banquet for 280 guests in full dress. Smilax and red roses decorated the tables. The menu was typical for the time and place: Blue Points (oysters), sandwiches, chicken salad, ice cream, two kinds of cake, and macaroons. An orchestra played and dedicatory speeches were given by representatives of surrounding towns.

Blair House, and the Commercial Club, was the town's social

City Hall (Blair House), Washington, Iowa as it looks today. Photograph, opposite, by Ellen Fenn.





Courtesy of Author

Blair House. Pen and ink drawing by Edna Jones.

center for twenty years. Dances, banquets and meetings were held there until the YMCA was built. In 1925 the building was purchased for \$10,000 by the city and became the seat of city government. A fire station was attached to the east side of the house and the fire bell hung in the tower. A larger front porch was also added.

The building has three stories connected by a beautifully turned walnut staircase. The first floor consists of a sitting room, parlor, dining room, pantry and kitchen. Two fireplaces were removed when slight alterations were made to provide for offices of the mayor, clerk and council.

Originally the second story had five bedrooms and a bath. In two of them imitation marble fireplaces remain. About the only structural change has been the removal of one wall. The third floor contains three rooms and a belfry above them.

The Washington County Historical Society is hopeful that the city council will see fit to restore the house to its original appearance. In recent years there has been a move to restore building fronts in the town in keeping with the style of architecture of the late 1800s: Blair House will become the focal point of this combined effort.

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Notes on Contributors

Boris Blick is an Associate Professor of History at The University of Akron. He is a native of New York City and received his Ph. D. from The University of Wisconsin.

Clifford Merrill Drury graduated with a B.A. degree from Buena Vista College in 1918 and earned a B.D. degree from San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1922. He was ordained by the Presbyterian Church in 1922, and in 1932 was granted the Doctor of Philosophy degree from The University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

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