

City Fire Department Headquarters
19th First Street, S.W.
Mason City
Cerro Gordo County
Iowa

HABS No. IA-126

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT HEADQUARTERS

HABS No. IA-126

- Location 19 First Street, S.W., Mason City, Cerro Gordo County, Iowa. Prior to 1916 the address of the building was 119 West Fifth Street.
- Present Owner: City of Mason City, Iowa.
- Present Occupant: City of Mason City Police Department
- Present Use: Police vehicle garage and miscellaneous storage with upper story mostly vacant.
- Significance: The building is an example of early 20th-century design eclecticism with use of Classical Revival ornamentation applied over a utilitarian building and Romanesque inspired design for the hose tower. The building served as the main fire station and headquarters of the Mason City Fire Department for 63 years.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1912.
2. Architects: Buechner and Orth.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The City of Mason City has been the only owner of the building. It was built on the same site as the original fire barn of the Mason City Fire Department. It sits on the east 44 feet of Lots 2 and 3 in Block 22 of Paul Felt's Plat.
4. General Contractor: Bailey-Marsh Company.
5. Alterations and additions: The building exterior appears much the same as originally built. A street light has been mounted to the front of the building. Similarly, the interior survives fairly intact with some second floor partition revisions and additions. The fireman poles and floor shutters have been removed. Some updating of the mechanical and electrical systems has been done. A spiral stair was added in the rear of the building. A masonry interior wall appears to have been altered with addition of a supporting steel beam.

B. Historical Context:

In 1910, Mason City's population exceeded 15,000 and was designated as a city of the first class. In order to improve its fire protection, the citizens of Mason City voted approval at a special election on

September 20, 1911, to build a new firehouse. The City Fire Department Headquarters building was the result and Mayor F.M. Norris was instrumental in achieving the construction of the building. Thomas Connor, who served as Fire Chief from 1909 to 1927, was the first Fire Chief to serve from the building. It replaced an old fire barn which stood on the same site. The "new" building also originally housed horses and horse-drawn equipment as the first fire truck in Mason City was not acquired until 1914 and horse-drawn equipment was not retired until 1918.

The building served as the only firehouse in Mason City until 1939 when a small station (Engine House 2) was built at 2020 South Federal Avenue. In 1972, when Engine House 2 was closed, the City Fire Department Headquarters once again became the only firehouse in Mason City. Because of physical limitations of the building to shelter new, modern fire equipment and because the city's fire insurance rating was threatened, a new central fire headquarters was built at 350 Fifth Street, S.W. in 1974, occupied in 1975, and replaced the 1912 building. The building has since been used as a garage for the police department whose headquarters is around the corner at 115 South Washington Avenue.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Basically a utilitarian building, it has applied eclectic design features with Classical Revival style ornamentation at the front and Romanesque inspired hose tower.
2. Condition of Fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-story building is basically a simple rectangle with overall plan dimensions of 40'-11" x 116'-3". Articulated and attached to the building on the east or alley side of the building are a main stair tower, hose drying tower, chimney, and basement stair wing. Measured at the stair tower, the overall width of the building is 49 feet.
2. Foundations: Brick and concrete.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: The front wall and east (alley) side of the building is of dark red face brick laid in running bond. The rear and party walls are of common brick laid in American common bond. The front and east walls of the building have decorative materials of stone for the water table, cornerstone, accents, coping, and identification signs. The cornice and dentils are of painted sheet tin. The common brick walls have a clay tile coping.

4. Structural system, framing: The building has brick walls and engaged brick pilasters which support concrete beams. The front 77 foot long portion of the building is divided into six equal bays and has 14" x 30" concrete beams which clear-span the width of the building. The rear 39 foot portion of the building has four structural bays with 10" x 11-1/2" concrete beams spanning between the sidewalls; however, these beams are supported at two intermediate points by columns on both floors. These column materials vary with use of 6" round cast iron or 10" x 10" concrete. Between the front part of the building and the rear with their differentiating structural system is a brickfire wall which, at the ground floor, is held clear of the floor at a height of 8'-4" by a pair of steel I beams which are shored by a grouping of three steel channels for columns and a wood post. This steel beam was probably an addition as it appears the brick wall originally separated the rear (stable) area from the front of the building.

The concrete beams support an 8" thick concrete flat floor slab and a concrete roof slab (much of the roof deck is not visible because of a dropped plaster ceiling). The boiler room in the partial basement also has concrete beams and concrete slab for support of the first floor.

5. Chimney: There is a large chimney of brick that engages the east wall. A portion of the upper chimney has been removed.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There are three doors for vehicles, two at the front and one toward the rear of the east wall. The two doors in the front wall are wood panel overhead doors with 24 small window lights and replaced earlier doors. There are three "pedestrian" doors of wood panel type with one large single window light in each. The main entry door is set in a "storefront" of wood and glass in the east wall towards the front of the building.
 - b. Windows: All windows are wood double-hung type with some fixed wood windows and transoms. All window sashes have a single light of glass.
7. Roof: The main roof is of built-up tar and gravel and is essentially flat with a uniform, gradual pitch to the rear wall where roof drains and interior drain lines are located for drainage. Sheet tin clads the pitched roofs of the hose tower and the small wing housing the stair to the basement.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: There is a small partial basement that houses the boiler room and coal bin. A small basement area containing a small meter room and coal chute area project beyond the east building line and are under a paved apron extension of the alley.
 - b. Ground floor: The first floor housed the fire equipment. The rear portion of the building originally was used as a stable area and continuous gratings crisscross the floor for required drainage. A toilet room is at the southeast corner.
 - c. Second floor: A large hall in the front portion of the building separates what was the officer's quarters from the firemen's dormitory. Beyond the dormitory and towards the rear, was a gang toilet and shower room and locker room. A masonry fire wall separates the "living quarters" from a rear area that was probably a hay loft originally and later used as a storage area.
2. Stairways: Both the main stair to the second floor and the stair to the basement are steel with steel treads. A steel spiral stair was added between the second and first floors.
 3. Flooring: Floors throughout are concrete. The rear portion of the first floor has a grid of trench drains with steel grating and plate covers. These drains were useful when horses were kept in the stables.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The ground floor has exposed concrete and brick finishes which are painted. There are a few partitions of wood on the first floor. The second floor has plaster walls and ceilings in the "living areas" and exposed brick walls and concrete "ceiling" at the rear.
 5. Doorways and doors: Interior doors are wood panel with wood frames.
 6. Trim: There is limited use of trim. Wood trim is used at the second floor "living areas." This includes a heavy wood baseboard, chair rail and map rail.
 7. Hardware: The hardware is sparingly used and very simple. Some hardware is missing.
 8. Skylights and borrowed light: There are two large skylights at the second floor. One is in the hallway and one is in the dormitory. There are high "clerestory" windows for borrowed light in the wall between the hallway and dormitory.

9. Lighting: Modernized fluorescent lighting has been installed on the ground floor and in some other scattered locations throughout the building. Ceiling mounted, incandescent lights with glass globes were used on the second floor. Bare incandescent bulbs were used in minor areas.
10. Heating: The building has a boiler in the partial basement that was originally coal fired; gas is now used. Newer gas space heaters have been installed to replace or supplement the central heating. Fresh air circulation is provided by air shafts and grills on the second floor.

D. Site:

General setting and orientation: The building faces First Street S.W. on the north and its long axis is oriented north-south parallel to an adjacent alley on the east. The west wall of the building was originally a shared party wall with another building of one story which has since been demolished. The site is essentially flat with a slight slope to the south, or towards the rear of the building. The lot the building stands on has approximate dimensions of 44' x 132'. The stair and hose tower appendages of the building project into the 33 foot wide alley right-of-way. Paving extends to the east wall of the building so the alley right-of-way line is indistinguishable. The building is set back approximately five feet from the front property line and this area is paved with concrete for the driveway and curb cut. The rear yard appears to be part of the gravel parking area for the nearby police station.

Prepared by: Ronald E. Schmitt, Architect
Environmental Planning & Research, Inc.
December 30, 1977

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Interviews:

John Holt, Fire Chief, Mason City Fire Department, 350 5th Street, S.W., Mason City, Iowa.

Ron Van Horn, Assistant Fire Chief, Mason City Fire Department, 350 5th Street, S.W., Mason City, Iowa.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources;

Davenport and Associates. Draft for Environmental Impact Statement. Mankato, Minnesota, January, 1976. Page 119.

Environmental Planning and Research, Inc. Architectural Inventory Surveys. Survey form (no. CBD-43) on file at Department of Community Development, Mason City, Iowa, November 5, 1976.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The architectural recording project of the building was the result of a Memorandum of Agreement between the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Iowa State Historic Preservation Officer and the City of Mason City, Iowa in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the redevelopment plan for the City of Mason City. Ronald E. Schmitt, an architect in Chicago, prepared the written documentation. The architectural measured drawings were prepared by Charles A. McCoy, and were based on the information gathered by Mr. Schmitt. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in Washington, D.C. office, edited the written documentation for transmittal to the Library of Congress. Photographer Thomas Yanul of Chicago made the documentary photographs. John A. Burns, AIA, was the HABS coordinator for this project.