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Historical Documentation

THOMAS V. AXTELL FARM

Bremer County, Iowa

submitted to: Iowa Department of Transportation 800 Lincoln Way Ames, Iowa 50010

FRASERdesign 1269 Cleveland Avenue Loveland, Colorado 80537

January 1992

Site Location:

Just west of U.S. Highway 218, 0.4 mile north of Janesville;

Jackson Township, Bremer County, Iowa;

SW½ SW¾, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West USGS quadrangle: Waverly, Iowa (7½ Minute Series, 1963)

UTM coordinates: 15.543315.4722845

Present Owner:

Iowa Department of Transportation, Ames IA

Present Usage:

vacant (scheduled for demolition in 1992)

Present Condition:

fair / poor

Significance:

When Thomas and Sophia Axtell moved to Bremer County, Iowa, in 1854, theirs was but one of thousands of families settling in the region in the years prior to the Civil War. A pioneer farmer of somewhat above average means, Axtell was not a central figure in the development of the community. Similarly, his house was not one of the most noteworthy among the farm dwellings built in the area. Rather, Axtell and his family represented the flood of early, agriculturally based settlement that occurred throughout eastern Iowa in the 1850s. And the house that he built typified rural Iowa domestic architecture, combining vernacular design and construction with a modest expression of the prevailing architectural style of the period.

Written by:

Carl W. McWilliams and Clayton B. Fraser

FRASERdesign

Loveland Colorado 80537

January 1992

Part I. Historical Information

A. PHYSICAL HISTORY

- 1. Construction Date: circa 1854
- 2. Architect/Builder: Thomas V. Axtell (assumed)
- 3. Ownership: The Thomas V. Axtell Farm comprises a tract of land in the SW\(\frac{1}{3}\) of the SW\(\frac{1}{3}\) of Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West, in Jackson Township, Bremer County, Iowa. The following references were taken from records in the Bremer County Clerk's Office:
 - Patent, 9 May 1853; recorded in "Abstract of Original Entries in Bremer County, Iowa."

 The United States of America to Berlin E. Shields, SW¹/₄ of SW¹/₄, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
 - Deed, 2 June 1853; recorded in Book 1, pp. 62-63.

 Berlin E. Shields to Thos. J. Sewell, SW 4 of SW 4, Section 26, Township 91

 North, Range 14 West.
 - Deed, 29 April 1854; recorded in Book B, p. 111.
 Thos. J. Sewell to Thos. V. Axtell, S½ of SW¾, Section 26, Township 91
 North, Range 14 West.
 - Quit Claim Deed, 23 June 1887.
 Sophia Axtell (widow of Thomas V.) et al. to Thos. W. Axtell, Elva J. Davey, and Florence L. Staples (children of Thomas and Sophia), S½ of SW¾, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
 - Quit Claim Deed, 4 January 1892.
 Florence L. Staples, Willis J. Staples, Elva J. Davey, and W.H. Davey to Thos. W. Axtell, S½ of SW¼, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
 - Warranty Deed, 5 February 1896.
 Thos. W. Axtell and wife to Henry Stiles, S½ of SW¾, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
 - Warranty Deed, 17 December 1903.
 Henry Stiles and wife to Harry Stiles, S½ of SW¾, Section 26, Township 91
 North, Range 14 West.

- 1920 Warranty Deed, 1 March 1920. Harry E. Stiles and wife to J.W. Ford, S½ of SW¾, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- Warranty Deed, 19 May 1923.
 J.W. Ford and wife to George P. Bishop, S¹/₂ of SW¹/₄, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- 1933 Warranty Deed, 23 May 1933.
 George P. Bishop to Cedar Investment Company, S¹/₂ of SW¹/₄, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- 1941 Warranty Deed, 31 December 1941. Cedar Investment Company to Roy S. Krieg, S¹/₂ of SW¹/₄, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- Warranty Deed, 7 March 1946. Roy S. Krieg to Dora and Joe G. Anderson, S¹/₂ of SW¹/₄, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- Joint Warranty Deed, 11 April 1956.

 Joe G. and Dora Anderson to Leonard E. and Thelma Redix, all of SW of SW, lying west of the highway in Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- Joint Warranty Deed, 23 May 1963.

 Leonard E. and Thelma Redix to Floyd and Bernice Robinson, all of SW of SW 1, lying west of the highway in Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- Joint Warranty Deed, 18 June 1971.
 Floyd and Bernice Robinson to James W. and Korene B. Helgeson, tract west of highway in SW\(\frac{1}{4}\) of SW\(\frac{1}{4}\), Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- Quit Claim Deed, 19 August 1988.

 Korene B. Helgeson to James W. Helgeson, irregular tract west of highway in SW¼ of SW¼, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 4 West.
- Warranty Deed, 15 October 1990.

 James W. and Diane K. Helgeson to State of Iowa, tract west of highway in SW¼ of SW¼, Section 26, Township 91 North, Range 14 West.
- 4: Original Plans, Construction: Thomas V. Axtell purchased this land in April 1854, and it is assumed he built the house himself soon thereafter using a traditional design. The building is configured as a 1½-story frame dwelling, with a vernacular I-house plan and Greek Revival architectural elements.

5: Alterations and Additions: The most historically significant alteration to the original house is the construction of a single-story rear addition that appears to date to the 1880s. Attached to the west wall of the original block, this brick/frame wing added about 420 square feet of kitchen space to the main floor with a cellar below. (This brick block probably replaced an earlier, frame lean-to rear wing.) The second-floor windows on the rear of the original block appear to have been modified at this time to accommodate the rear wing, and the first-floor rear windows and exterior siding were removed entirely where the addition covered the original block. Sometime after the turn of the century a shed-roofed sleeping chamber was built in the north el between the main block and the kitchen wing. A more recent addition, used as a mud porch and a pass-through between the house and a rear garage (since demolished), was built onto the west end of the kitchen sometime after World War II.

Other, more recent exterior alterations vary in degree of obtrusiveness, although none obscure the overall form of the house. The first-floor south wall of the main block has had a modern bow window added and wood paneling nailed over the original beveled siding. A full-width pent roof shelters both window and siding. The original brick chimney(s) have been removed from the main block, and a concrete block flue has been added to the north wall of the rear wing. All roof surfaces have been sheathed with three-tab asphalt shingles. The original kitchen windows have been replaced with wood factory-built sash; aluminum storm windows have been added over many of the original wood sash. The original door on the south entrance to the kitchen wing has been replaced, and the original door on the kitchen's west wall has been secured closed. Finally, in 1953 a modest concrete stoop was poured at the front entrance.

The interior modifications have been extensive, involving the house's surface finishes and, to a lesser extent, its spatial arrangement. A new bathroom has been formed behind the stair hall on the first floor by framing new walls in the sitting room. A large cased opening now joins the parlor and the kitchen. An interior stair to the cellar has been built along the west wall of the kitchen. Of all the elements in the Axtell House, however, the interior finishes and trim have suffered the most from recent alterations: Many of the plaster walls have been covered with wood paneling, most of the floor with carpeting. The original casings and baseboards in the parlor and kitchen have been replaced with wood streamline trim. And an acoustical panel ceiling has been suspended from the original plaster ceiling in the sitting room.

The central stairway and stair halls on both levels remain essentially unchanged, but the upstairs rooms have been altered with the installation of wood paneling and carpet like those on the main floor. All of the original second-floor window and door casings have been left in place, but, except for the door hinges, virtually all of the original door and window hardware throughout the house has been removed. The most visually destructive interior alteration involves the recent work in the kitchen as part of the asbestos abatement prior to demolition of the house. The floor tiles have been removed and the recent built-in cabinets have been displaced as part of this recent alteration.

B. HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PROPERTY

With family roots traceable to England, Thomas Axtell's ancestors first immigrated to America in Somerset County, New Jersey, in the late 1600s. A century later the family was well established along the Atlantic coast, and in about 1780 Axtell's grandfather moved to Washington County, Pennsylvania, taking part in the trans-Appalachian settlement of the late 18th century. Charles Axtell (Thomas' father) continued the family's westward migration a generation later, moving to Iroquois County, Illinois, in 1834.

Born in 1820 in Washington County, Pennsylvania, Thomas Vennum Axtell was 14 years old at the time of his family's move from Pennsylvania to Illinois. In 1843 Axtell married Sophia Kay, and she bore the couple's first child, Francis Marion, the following May. In 1854 Axtell moved his family to Bremer County in northeastern Iowa, joining the throngs of others in settling America's agricultural heartland west of the Mississippi River.²

Bremer County was one of the state's 45 counties established in 1851.³ Encompassing lands previously held by the Winnebago tribe, Bremer County initially shared forms of local government with neighboring Fayette and Buchanan Counties.⁴ As the Axtells and other early settlers established farms in the area, local communities sprang up to provide basic services. Janesville was established in 1849 as the county's first permanent settlement. Founded by pioneers John and Jane Barrick (for whom the town was named), Janesville straddled the county's south line and formed the commercial and social center of Jackson Township. Other principal settlements that developed in the county included Waverly (the county seat), Frederika, Horton and Denver.⁵

When the Axtells purchased their farm just north of Janesville in 1854, the town was in its formative stages. Janesville, though, grew steadily, and shortly after the Civil War supported three churches, two general stores, two grain elevators, flouring and saw mills, millinery and tailor shops, a cooperage and a blacksmith shop. As Janesville developed, so too did the region's nearby farms generate a sense of permanence. Like other successful farms in the area, the value of Thomas Axtell's holdings increased from a reported \$5,000.00 in 1860 to \$13,750.00 in 1870. At the time of Axtell's death in 1883, the farm encompassed 280 acres, ranking among the region's larger acreages. After Axtell's death, the Axtell farm was maintained by his widow, Sophia, and by their children. Their son, Thomas W. Axtell (born in 1861), eventually took over control of the farm until its ownership passed from the family in 1896. Both Thomas V. and Sophia Axtell, who died in 1910, are buried in nearby Oakland Cemetery.

From the time of their arrival in the early 1850s the Axtell family helped shape Bremer County's cultural and physical landscape. The family had brought with it social and religious customs rooted in earlier generations. The Axtells also brought with them such conventions as traditional farming practices, building methods and an empirical knowledge of folk architecture types that their forbears

had used in Pennsylvania, Illinois and New Jersey. With its I-house configuration and Greek Revival architectural detailing, the Axtell farmhouse is among the last regional vestiges to provide insight into the progression of these cultural traditions into midwestern America.

Endnotes

¹For a more in-depth discussion regarding the Axtell family genealogy, see Marlin R. Ingalls, "Iowa Site Inventory - Axtell Farm," 30 December 1990, on file at the Iowa State Historic Preservation Office, Des Moines, Iowa, and the Iowa Department of Transportation, Ames, Iowa.

²For information regarding the Axtell family in Iowa, see the 1860, 1870 and 1880 federal censuses for Iowa. See also Iowa census returns for 1885 and 1895, microfilm copies on file at the Waverly Public Library, Waverly, Iowa. For information on Thomas Vennum Axtell, see Probate File No. 321, "Estate of T.V. Axtell," on file at the Bremer County Clerk of Court's Office, Waverly, Iowa.

³Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1974), p. 96.

⁴J.F. Grawe, History of Bremer County Iowa: A Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement, vol. 1 (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1914), p. 90.

5Ibid.

⁶H.S. Hoover and William P. Reeves, *Atlas Map of Bremer County, Iowa* (Milwaukee: J. Knauber and Company, 1875), p. 49.

7"1860 Federal Census - Iowa," and "1870 Federal Census - Iowa," micro-film copies on file at Waverly Public Library, Waverly, Iowa.

⁸Thomas V. Axtell died on September 14, 1883, two days after being thrown underneath a team of horses. His obituary appeared in *The Waverly Republican* on September 20, 1883:

On Wednesday afternoon of last week, Mr. T. V. Axtell in company with Will Meyers started to take each a load of cane to mill. On approaching the bridge across the dry run, east of the Mullen Ford bridge - on the Shell Rock river - he held up his team quite suddenly to prevent their coming in contact with the load ahead, when the cane on top of his load slipped forward, precipitating him beneath the horses and they being startled, sprang quickly forward, drawing the forward wheel over his right arm and

shoulder crushing the bone to atoms. Meyers stopped his team and sprang to the heads of Mr. Axtell's team, stopping them just as the hind wheel struck the neck of Mr. Axtell. He got out from under the wagon himself and walked to the nearest house, about \(\frac{1}{4} \) of a mile distant where he had his arm bound tightly to his body with a sheet and was then taken in a buggy and carried home. Medical aid was summoned, but doctors were of no avail. He died on Friday afternoon, at 5 o'clock. He was buried from the Presbyterian church in Janesville on Sunday, and was followed to the grave by the entire community. His children were all present at the funeral except his daughter Florence and his two son[s]-in-law. Mr. Davey and R. Staples did not arrive until after his death.

⁹See cemetery records for Oakland Cemetery on file at Waverly Public Library, Waverly, Iowa.

Part II. Architectural Information

A. GENERAL STATEMENT

- 1. Architectural Character: Based on Georgian architectural antecedents dating from the 1700s in America, the Thomas Axtell House employs a 1½ story I-house plan with Greek Revival detailing. The original house features a five-bay symmetrical facade and is two rooms wide and one room deep. Often called the "National Style", Greek Revival was the dominant expression for domestic architecture between circa 1830 and 1860. The Axtell House thus represents the progression of this national architectural trend into Iowa as the state was undergoing its enormous settlement just before the Civil War.
- 2. Condition of Fabric: fair / poor

B. DESCRIPTION OF EXTERIOR

- Overall Dimensions: Original block 37'4" by 18'4"; rear kitchen wing 25'0" by 20'0"; first-floor sleeping chamber addition 16'0" by 8'5"; rear mud porch 10'2" by 10'3".
- 2. Foundations: Low stone rubble perimeter walls.
- 3. Exterior Walls: Main block and sleeping chamber addition narrow exposure, painted wood beveled siding with plain corner boards and water tables; kitchen common bond brick, painted white; mud porch horizontal masonite siding.

- 4. Structural system: Main block milled wood platform framing, with hewn timber sills and sawn rafter plates; kitchen - brick bearing walls with sawn wood roof framing.
- 5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: Small, half-round concrete stoop centrally located on east front of main block; two-step concrete stoops on south and west sides of kitchen wing; concrete bulkhead cellar entrance on south side of kitchen.
- 6. Chimneys: One exterior, concrete block chimney on north wall of kitchen wing. (Original interior stove chimney(s) in main block have been removed.)
- 7. Openings: Centrally placed, single-leaf front doorway on east side of main block, featuring molded, six-panel door capped by a blind transom and flanked by four-light sidelights with paneled bulkheads. Easily the most ornate feature of the house, this doorway is recessed into the facade and framed by a shallowly pedimented, Greek Revival crown. One single-leaf doorway with a paneled, three-light wood door enters into the kitchen on the south side; a doorway with one paneled wood door enters the kitchen on the west side; single-leaf doorways enter the mud porch on the south and west. All the doorways other than the front entrance feature plain-board casements and slip sills.

Windows are predominantly double-hung wood sash with plain framing and a variety of light patterns, including 1/1, 3/3, 3/6, 6/1, and 6/2. Most window casings on the main block have molded Greek Revival crowns; windows elsewhere on the house have plain-board enframements with slip sills. A factory-built bow window has been recently installed on the south wall of the main block.

8. Roof: Steeply pitched-side gable roof over main block; moderately pitched gable roofs over rear kitchen and mud porch additions; shed roof over first-floor bedroom addition on west side of main block. All roofs have three-tab asphalt shingles over earlier wood shingles and feature plain-board boxed cornices and soffits.

C. DESCRIPTION OF INTERIOR

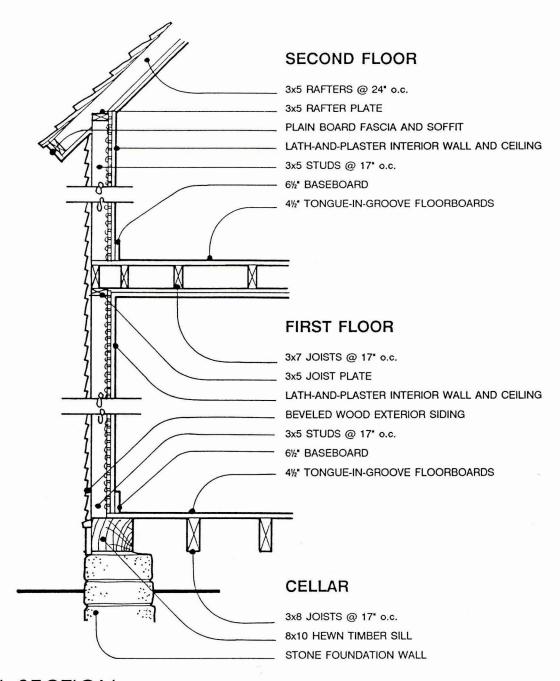
1. Floor plan: Two rooms wide, one room deep and 1½ stories tall, with a central stair hall, the original block of the Axtell House is laid out using what is termed a Georgian subtype of the traditional I-house configuration. (The classic I-house has a full second floor, exterior end fireplace chimneys and a quarter-turn stair in one corner. The Axtell House differs by degree in these features.) A parlor and sitting room flank a central straight-flight stairway on the first floor. Ascending to three sleeping chambers around a center stair hall upstairs, the stairway features an open balustrade comprised of 3/4" balusters, spaced 5 inches on center. Made entirely of walnut, the stairway features handrails pegged into tapered newel posts at each end. A recently constructed bathroom is situated behind the stairway on the first floor and is accessed from the sitting room and the kitchen addition. The original house probably had one or two central stoves, and likely

also featured a lean-to kitchen, removed with the construction of the present brick rear wing. An additional sleeping chamber, built circa 1910, is accessible through a doorway on the kitchen's north side. A mud porch is located to the west of the kitchen.

2. Interior finishes: The original building's interior finishes include lath-and-plaster walls and ceilings, and tongue-in-groove wood floors. Most walls, originally painted or papered, have been more recently covered with wood paneling, while the ceilings feature painted paper. The sitting room has a ceiling of suspended acoustical tiles, and some of the floors are partially carpeted. The floor of the kitchen consisted of vinyl-asbestos tiles (recently removed), the mud porch floor is a simple concrete slab.

D. DESCRIPTION OF SITE

The Thomas Axtell Farm is located just west of U.S. Highway 218 about ½ mile north of the Janesville city limits. Facing east, the house sits on a slight hill overlooking the highway. Large oak and willow trees and native grasses are found throughout the property, and the yard is partially enclosed by a deteriorating wire fence. A gravel driveway enters the property from the highway, forming a turnaround between the house and the rest of the farm buildings. A stock shed and other outbuildings are located south of the driveway, all built in the 20th century using light frame construction. Most of the surrounding countryside is under cultivation, with corn as the principal crop.



WALL SECTION TWO-STORY ORIGINAL SECTION SCALE: 1/2" = 1-0"

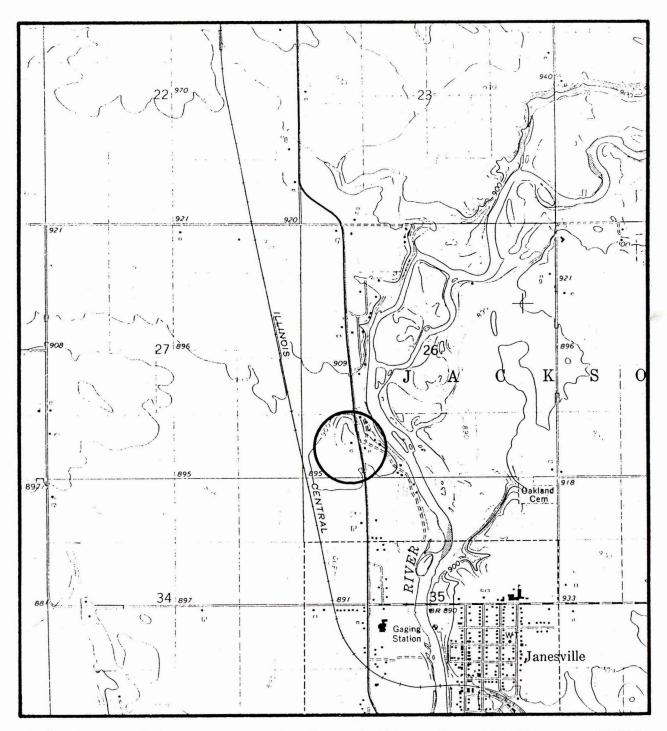
Part III. Sources of Information

PUBLISHED SOURCES

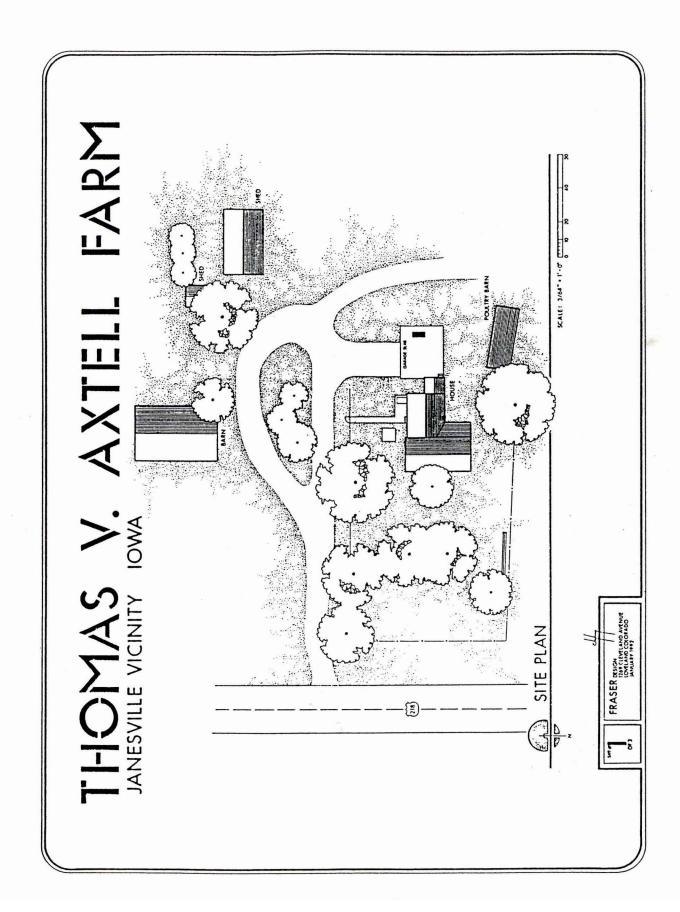
- Atlas of Bremer County, Iowa. Minneapolis: The Title Atlas Company, 1965.
- Atlas of Bremer County, Iowa. Minneapolis: The Title Atlas Company, 1975.
- Atlas of Bremer County, Iowa. Minneapolis: The Title Atlas Company, 1983.
- Axtell, Thomas V. (obituary) The Waverly Republican, 20 September 1883.
- Bremer County, Iowa. Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1985.
- "Died" (obituary for Thomas V. Axtell). The Waverly Democrat, 21 September 1883.
- Gottfried, Herbert, and Jennings, Jan. American Vernacular Design: 1870 1940. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1985.
- Grawe, J.F. History of Bremer County Iowa: A Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement, vol. 1. Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1914.
- History of Butler and Bremer Counties, Iowa. Springfield, Illinois: Union Publishing Company, 1883.
- Hoover, H.S., and Reeves, William P. Atlas Map of Bremer County, Iowa. Milwaukee: J. Knauber and Company, 1875.
- Leonard, Helen Maxine C., comp. The Janesvillians 1849-1974. Janesville, Iowa: The Janesville Quasqui-Centennial Committee, 1974.
- McAlester, Virginia, and McAlester, Lee. A Field Guide to American Houses. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.
- Noble, Allen G. Wood, Brick, and Stone: The North American Settlement Landscape. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.
- Sage, Leland. A History of Iowa. Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1974.
- Standard Atlas of Bremer County, Iowa. Chicago: George A. Ogle and Company, 1917.
- Whiffen, Marcus. American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969.

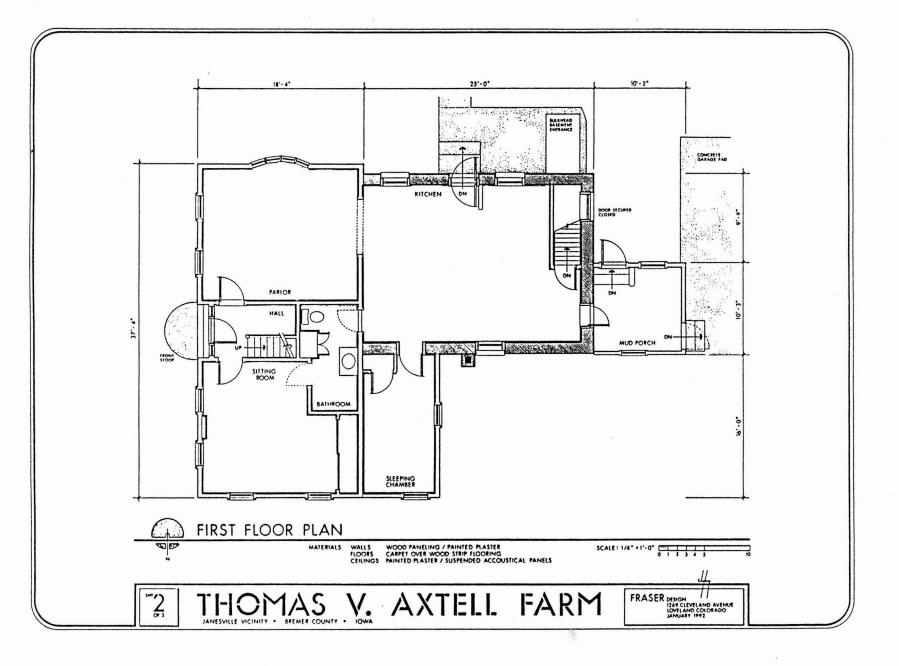
UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

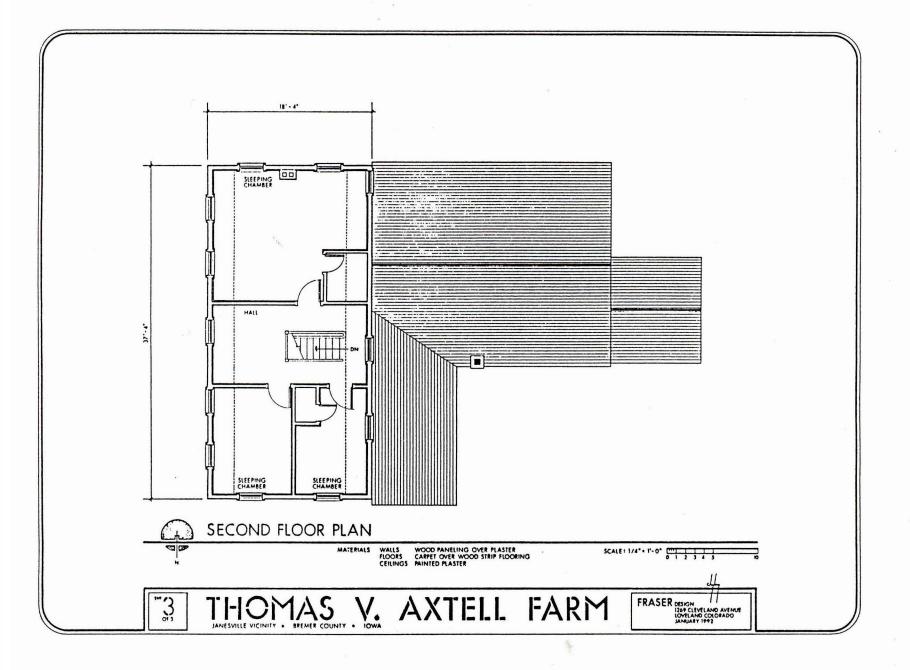
- "Abstract of Original Entries in Bremer County, Iowa." on file at Bremer County Clerk's Office, Waverly, Iowa.
- Bremer County Grantor Grantee Books, 1857-1991, on file at Bremer County Clerk's Office, Waverly, Iowa. (See Chain of Title in Part I. of this report for specific entries.)
- "1860 Federal Census Iowa." Microfilm copy on file at Waverly Public Library, Waverly, Iowa. (See entries under Bremer County.)
- "1870 Federal Census Iowa." Microfilm copy on file at Waverly Public Library, Waverly, Iowa. (See entries under Bremer County.)
- Ingalls, Marlin R. "Iowa Site Inventory Axtell Farm." 30 December 1990, on file at the Iowa State Historic Preservation Office, Des Moines, Iowa, and the Iowa Department of Transportation, Ames, Iowa.
- "Iowa Census 1885 Bremer County." Microfilm copy on file at Waverly Public Library, Waverly, Iowa. (See entries under "Jackson Township.")
- "Iowa Census Returns 1895 Bremer County." Microfilm copy on file at Waverly Public Library, Waverly, Iowa. (See entries under "Janesville and Jackson Township.")
- Probate File No. 321, "Estate of T.V. Axtell." September 1883, on file at Bremer County Clerk of Court's Office, Waverly, Iowa.
- "Tenth [Federal] Census 1880 Iowa." Microfilm copy on file at Waverly Public Library, Waverly, Iowa. (See entries under Bremer County.)
- "Transfer of Lands No. 1, Township 91 North, Ranges 13 and 14 West." On file at Bremer County Clerk's Office, Waverly, Iowa. (See entries under Section 23.)



Taken from USGS Waverly, Iowa, quadrangle map [7.5 Minute Series, 1963 (photorevised 1972)].







Photographs

- 1) Overall view of farm and house; view to west.
- 2) East front of original block of house; view to west.
- 3) East front and south side of house; view to northwest.
- 4) South side and east front of house; view to northwest.
- 5) South side of house; view to north.
- 6) South side and west rear of house; view to northeast.
- 7) West rear of house; view to east.
- 8) East front and north side of house; view to southwest.
- Detail of east front of main block of house, showing main entrance, typical second-floor window and roof cornice; view to west.
- 10) Detail of main entrance on east front of main block of house; view to west.
- 11) Detail of south gable of main block of house, showing second-floor and gable windows and roof cornice; view to northwest.
- 12) Detail of doorway on west rear of kitchen wing of house; view to east.
- 13) Kitchen on first floor of house, looking toward parlor; view to southeast.
- 14) Northeast sleeping chamber on second floor of house; view to northeast.
- 15) South sleeping chamber on second floor of house; view to southeast.
- 16) Central stairway on first floor of house; view to northwest.
- 17) Stair hall on second floor of house; view to west.
- 18) Detail of front doorway in main block of house; view to east.
- 19) North and east sides of shed; view to southwest.
- 20) North and east sides of barn; view to southwest.
- 21) North and west sides of barn; view to southeast.
- 22) North and east sides of shed; view to southwest.
- 23) South and west sides of poultry barn; view to northeast.





