

# THE OTTUMWA PRESERVATIONIST



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## WELCOME

After several weeks of an especially harsh end to winter, spring is beginning to delight our senses and coax us to the out of doors once again. Make plans to walk our historic districts, enjoy the Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Empire, and a host of architectural styles, notice the brick streets, the limestone walls so characteristic of Ottumwa, imagine life inside the homes and businesses when they were built, and maybe meet a neighborhood or two.

The Historic Preservation Commission delights in bringing people to together around historic preservation. Again, we gathered with residents of our historic districts in October to share our progress and hear concerns. Our historic district signage was also delivered and installed in October and November.

We are looking forward to May, which is the month that historic preservation is celebrated nationally. Our commission will be presenting an evening cemetery walk and luminary display May 14th. Please read details elsewhere in this newsletter.

Don't forget to check out our webpage at <https://www.ottumwa.us/preservation/> for more information and a google map walking tour of the districts.

Dennis Willhoit, Chair



*Left: "New Hotel Ottumwa, ca 1929s" Ottumwa, IA*

*Wapello County Historical Society & Museum Postcard Collection*

*Below: Ottumwa Cemetery Gates photo credit Find A Grave*

## *HISTORIC HOTEL OTTUMWA*

BY DR. RICK WOTEN

Few have spent any significant time in Ottumwa, Iowa without finding themselves attending a wedding, participating in a club or group meeting, staying overnight at Hotel Ottumwa, enjoying hot cup of coffee, a meal, or generally spending time with friends for a fun evening and entertainment at the Pink Pig, Tom-Tom Tap, or Second Street Cafe. So important to the community is the hotel that in recognition of its architectural, commercial, and social history significance, Hotel Ottumwa earned National Register of Historic Places distinction in 2012. Undoubtedly then, recent news of one of Ottumwa's most iconic and historic buildings going up for sale sparked significant inquiry, its history included.

Born from the 1915 vision of local business leaders to address a significant shortfall of high-end lodging accommodations in the community and the desire to establish "a first class luxury hotel in Ottumwa," excitement for the potential community development project grew rapidly. With plans for a grand ballroom, the community saw the new hotel as much more than a business venture. As a central location for civic and social club meetings and grand balls, 309 people bought shares in the corporation created to see the vision become reality. The result was over \$300,000 invested in the hotel project and subsequent improvement to downtown. (i)

In turn, the corporation selected the prominent Des Moines-based architecture firm of Proud, Birdfoot, and Rawson for the development of a six-story rectangular hotel, in the neoclassical style. By early fall of 1917, the hotel, and its seven storefronts on the main floor, was ready for business. The community celebrated the new hotel's opening and broke in the new ballroom with a banquet on September 4th and a Grand Reception and Ball on September 6th. As if the grand new hotel needed any additional help to convince citizens, visitors, and patrons of its grandeur, the hotel's opening banquet presented a meal with "caviar, lobster patties, and roast squab" that similarly astounded attendees.



## *HPC GUIDED LUMINARY CEMENTARY TOUR*

BY CARA GALLOWAY

Have you ever walked through the gates of the Ottumwa Cemetery and thought about the stories and history that lie within?

Join the Historic Preservation Commission on Friday May 14th for a guided luminaire cemetery tour fundraiser.

Throughout your tour local Ottumwans will mesmerize you with stories of the past and spike your curiosity about who else is rests in the cemetery.

The tours will begin at 6 PM and will happen every 30 minutes. Purchase your tickets at <https://forms.gle/oMgwqKnsHydrnnjL7> and reserve your time. Tickets can be purchased at the cemetery the night of. Tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children.

# The Ottumwa Preservationist

## *HISTORIC HOTEL OTTUMWA CONT.*

BY DR. RICK WOTEN

The new hotel flourished with a drug store, millinery, jeweler, barber, cab company, insurance company, and cigar stand, among others occupying the store spaces between 1918 and 1958. Beginning in 1927, the Ottumwa Chamber of Commerce also resided within the hotel's walls for a number of years. With the inclusion of a billiards room and bowling alley, the hotel quickly established itself as a central hub of commercial, civic, and social life by the mid-1920s.

The 1920s also witnessed a new technology emerge as an exciting new mass communication tool. Throughout the Roaring Twenties, the radio served up local and national information – including farm and market reports –, music, and sporting event which linked the region's rural populations with its neighboring cities and towns.

As the retail costs and size of the radio rapidly made it feasible as a commercial item, Americans embraced the technological marvel of modernity. Underlining how important Hotel Ottumwa had become to those inside and outside the community, the Burlington radio station, WIAS Broadcasting, relocated to Ottumwa and Hotel Ottumwa in 1928 where it remained a conduit to the region's populace until ceasing operations in 1934.

The Great Depression ushered in the 1930s and severe economic challenges across the United States. Similarly, Ottumwans and local businesses faced these challenges and little new seemed to be on the agenda for Hotel Ottumwa during the decade. However, by 1939, conditions improved enough that the hotel had a new owner, Henry Snider. Perhaps to brush off the waning fatigue of the Depression or, more likely, addressing deferred maintenance, Snider set forth on a hotel remodeling project. While Snider's plans called for, "the redecorating of the lobby, ballroom, and many guest rooms, changing of the clerk's desk, and new elevators," the star of the remodel was the new coffee shop, "decorated in pink, coral, and copper with ebony black trimmings," known as the Pink Pig.

By 1951, Snider once again found himself involved renovations at Hotel Ottumwa. Many communities across the country witnessed housing and commercial booms alongside economic redevelopment in the post-World War Two years and Ottumwa was no different. Sparked by major downtown redevelopment, including the railroad station, Snider sought to kept pace and appeal to the burgeoning middle-class travelers and citizens with the renovations resulting in the opening of the Tom-Tom Tap and its "Lighting the Ceremonial Fire – Plains Indians" mural by Kansas City artist Daniel MacMorris. However, the 1951 renovations were the last by Snider with his widow closing and selling the hotel upon his death in 1973.

The hotel gained new life in 1982 as the Schwartz family, the current owners, purchased, renovated, and reopened the hotel. Over the past 39 years, the Schwartz family has restored the iconic hotel to its cultural and civic place within the community while stewarding and honoring its tremendous history. Hotel Ottumwa now faces another significant moment in its long and treasured history. A staple of our community, its history is still being written. While we celebrate its history and appreciate those who have stewarded the grand hotel's legacy since 1917, a new chapter in its history awaits. We look forward to its future as it welcomes the community and visitors and reminds all of our community's history for years to come. To book and event, stay, or other inquiries, please consult Hotel Ottumwa's website: [www.hotelottumwa.com](http://www.hotelottumwa.com)

Molly Myers Naumann, "Hotel Ottumwa," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2012), 5.

Naumann, "Hotel Ottumwa," 8-9, 11: "Our Story," Hotel Ottumwa, February 27, 2021, [www.hotelottumwa.com/our-story/](http://www.hotelottumwa.com/our-story/)

## SIGNS UP IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Signage designating each of Ottumwa's seven National Registry Districts have been placed along the historic district streets. The HPC worked with graphic designer Sara Statema-Johnson to identify architecture representative of each of the districts and then coordinate them for a common theme amongst all the districts.

If you haven't already you can explore the districts and learn more about the rich history of Ottumwa Historic Neighborhoods and other National Registered items in Ottumwa using an interactive tour to allow the community to learn more about the rich history of the

The [virtual tour](#) uses Google Maps and allows citizens to enjoy a nice drive or get your steps in with a walk around town to each district.

When you go on your tour make sure you have the [Ottumwa Historic Treasures](#) also open on your phone to find more detailed information about the districts and items in the districts.

The tours and supplement document can be found clicking the links above or by visiting our website at <https://www.cityofottumwa.com/preservation/>.