



Date November 3, 2025

**RESOLUTION SETTING HEARING ON REQUEST FROM JOHN M. BEARD (OWNER),
FOR DESIGNATION OF THE W.W. WITMER HOUSE LOCATED AT 2900 GRAND
AVENUE, AS A LOCAL LANDMARK**

WHEREAS, John M. Beard, owner of the property located at 2900 Grand Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa (“Property”), has made application to designate the Property as a Local Landmark named “W.W. Witmer House”; and

WHEREAS, the Property is legally described as follows:

THE NORTH 240 FEET OF LOT 1 IN LANGAN PLACE, AN OFFICIAL PLAT,
NOW INCLUDED IN AND FORMING A PART OF THE CITY OF DES
MOINES, POLK COUNTY, IOWA.

WHEREAS, on September 17, 2025, the Historic Preservation Commission voted 5-0-2 to recommend that the “W.W. Witmer House” be designated a local Landmark; and

WHEREAS, the City Plan and Zoning Commission has advised that at a public hearing held on October 16, 2025, its members voted 9-0 in support of a motion to recommend **APPROVAL** of a request from the John M. Beard to designate the “W.W. Witmer House” located at 2900 Grand Avenue as a Local Landmark; and

WHEREAS, the Des Moines Municipal Code Section 58-60 requires a public hearing be held before the City Council to consider this application.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, by the City Council of the City of Des Moines, Iowa, as follows:

1. That the attached communication from the Plan and Zoning Commission is hereby received and filed.
2. That the meeting of the City Council at which the proposed landmark designation application is to be considered, and at which time the City Council will hear both those who oppose and those who favor the proposal, shall be held at the Council Chambers, City Hall, 400 Robert D. Ray Drive, Des Moines, Iowa, at 5:00 p.m. on November 17, 2025.
3. That the City Clerk is hereby authorized and directed to cause notice of said proposal in the accompanying form to be given by publication once, not less than four (4) days and not more than twenty (20) days before the date of hearing, all as specified in Section 362.3 of the Iowa Code.



Roll Call Number

Agenda Item Number

18

Date November 3, 2025

MOVED BY _____ TO ADOPT. SECOND BY _____.

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

/s/ Emily A. Duffy

Emily A. Duffy

Assistant City Attorney

CAHP-2025-000048

COUNCIL ACTION	YEAS	NAYS	PASS	ABSENT
BOESEN				
SIMONSON				
VOSS				
COLEMAN				
WESTERGAARD				
MANDELBAUM				
GATTO				
TOTAL				

MOTION CARRIED

APPROVED

Mayor

CERTIFICATE

I, LAURA BAUMGARTNER, City Clerk of said City hereby certify that at a meeting of the City Council of said City of Des Moines, held on the above date, among other proceedings the above was adopted.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal the day and year first above written.

City Clerk

Date November 3, 2025Agenda Item 18

Roll Call # _____



October 22, 2025

Communication from the City Plan and Zoning Commission advising that at their October 16, 2025 meeting, the following action was taken on request from John Beard (owner), for designation of the W.W. Witmer House at 2900 Grand Avenue as a Local Landmark:

COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION: 9-0

After public hearing, the members voted as follows:

Commission Action:	Yes	Nays	Pass	Abstain	Absent
Francis Boggus	X				
Leah Rudolphi	X				
Chris Draper					X
Laura Kessel					X
Todd Garner					X
Johnny Alcivar					X
Carolyn Jenison	X				
William Page	X				
Andrew Lorentzen	X				
Emily Webb	X				
Katie Gillette	X				
Rick Trower	X				
Jane Rongerude	X				
John Erpelding					X

Approval that the property "W.W. Witmer House" be designated as a local Landmark.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION TO THE P&Z COMMISSION

Staff recommends that the property "W.W. Witmer House" be designated as a local Landmark.

STAFF REPORT TO THE PLANNING COMMISSION

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

1. **Case Overview:** The subject property measures 194 feet by 340 feet. It contains a 2½-story house built circa 1906 and a garage built circa 1975 according to the Polk County Assessor webpage. The property is located on the southwest corner of the Grand Avenue and 29th Street Intersection.

On September 17, 2025, the Historic Preservation Commission reviewed the Local Landmark nomination of the “W.W. Witmer House” and recommended approval of the request. The Historic Preservation Commission and the Plan and Zoning Commission recommendations will be forwarded to the City Council for review in accordance with Chapter 58-60 and Chapter 82-40 of the City Code.

2. **Size of Site:** 1.069 acres.
3. **Existing Zoning (site):** “NX3” Neighborhood Mix District.
4. **Adjacent Land Use and Zoning:**
 - North** – “NX3”; Uses are multiple household residential.
 - South** – “N1b”; Use is one-household residential.
 - East** – “NX3”; Uses are multiple household residential.
 - West** – “NX3” Uses are office buildings and surface parking lot.
5. **Applicable Recognized Neighborhood(s):** The subject building is not located within a designated Neighborhood Association but within 250 feet of the Greenwood Historic Neighborhood Association. The subject building is also located within the Owl’s Head Local Historic District. All recognized neighborhoods were notified of the meeting by emailing the Final Agenda on October 10, 2025. All agendas are emailed to the primary contact(s) designated by the recognized neighborhood association to the City of Des Moines Neighborhood Development Division.
6. **PlanDSM Land Use Plan Designation:** High Density Residential and partially within a Neighborhood Node and a Community Node.
7. **Applicable Regulations:** Pursuant to Chapter 82-40(a) of the City Code, the Plan and Zoning Commission is an advisory body to the City Council and is a key factor in the growth and development of the city. Therefore, the Commission reviews all local Landmark and Historic District nominations in accordance with the Historic Preservation Ordinance and for compliance with the City’s Comprehensive Plan and forwards a recommendation to the City Council.

II. APPLICABLE SECTIONS OF THE CITY CODE

Section 58-56 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance contains the landmark purpose statement. Section 58-58 contains the criteria for the designation of a landmark and Section 58-60 establishes the nomination process.

Sec. 58-56. Purpose.

It is declared as a matter of public policy that the protection, enhancement, perpetuation and use of improvements of special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value is a public necessity and is required in the interest of health, prosperity, safety and welfare of the people. The purpose of this article is to:

- (1) Effect and accomplish the protection, enhancement and perpetuation of such improvements which represent or reflect elements of the city's cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history;
- (2) Safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic and cultural heritage, as embodied and reflected in such improvements;
- (3) Stabilize and improve property values;
- (4) Foster civic pride in the beauty and accomplishments of the past;
- (5) Protect and enhance the city's attractions to residents, tourists, and visitors and serve as a support and stimulus to business and industry;
- (6) Strengthen the economy of the city; and
- (7) Promote the use of landmarks for the education, pleasure and welfare of the people of the city.

Sec. 58-58. Designation criteria.

- (a) For purpose of this article, a landmark or landmark site designation may be placed on any site, natural or improved, including any building, improvement or structure located thereon that possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association and that:
 - (1) Is significant in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture;
 - (2) Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
 - (3) Is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
 - (4) 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 may lack individual distinction; or
 - (5) Has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

- (b) Ordinarily cemeteries, birthplaces, or graves of historical figures; properties owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes; structures that have been moved from their original locations; reconstructed historic buildings; properties primarily commemorative in nature; and properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years shall not be considered eligible for the landmark designation. However, such properties will qualify if they fall within the following categories:
- (1) A religious property deriving primary significance from architectural or artistic distinction or historical importance.
 - (2) A building or structure removed from its original location which is significant primarily for architectural value, or which is the surviving structure most importantly associated with a historic person or event.
 - (3) A birthplace or grave of a historical figure of outstanding importance, if there is no appropriate site or building directly associated with his or her productive life.
 - (4) A cemetery which derives its primary significance from graves of persons of transcendent importance, from age, from distinctive design features, or from association with historic events.
 - (5) A reconstructed building when accurately executed in a suitable environment and presented in a dignified manner as part of a restoration master plan, and when no other building or structure with the same association has survived.
 - (6) A property primarily commemorative in nature, if design, age, tradition or symbolic value has invested it with its own historical significance.
 - (7) A property achieving significance within the past 50 years, if it is of exceptional importance.

Sec. 58-60. Procedures.

- (a) The historic preservation commission shall consider the nomination of landmarks and landmark sites, and make a report and recommendation on such nomination to the city plan and zoning commission and city council as provided below.
- (b) Notice that an application for designation of a landmark or landmark site is being considered shall be given to the owner of the parcel on which the proposed landmark is situated or which is part of the proposed landmark site in accordance with the following:
 - (1) Such notice shall be served by certified mail, addressed to the owner at his or her last known address as such appears in the records of the county treasurer's office, or if there is no name on such records, such notice may be served by regular mail addressed to "owner" at the street address of the property in question.
 - (2) Such owner shall have the right to confer with the historic preservation commission prior to final action by the commission on the application.
 - (3) The historic preservation commission may, in addition, hold the public hearing of the proposed designation by giving notice as required by law.
- (c) After such investigation by the historic preservation commission, but in no case more than 60 days after the receipt of the complete application, the application for designation shall be recommended for approval or disapproval. Such recommendation shall be in writing and shall state the reasons for recommending approval or disapproval. The recommendation may limit itself to the proposed landmark or landmark site as described in the application or may include modifications thereof. Such

recommendation shall be forwarded to and filed with the plan and zoning commission, within five days after making such recommendation.

- (d) Upon receipt of such recommendation, the plan and zoning commission shall schedule a public hearing at a specific place, date and time, not more than 30 days after such receipt, by giving notice as required by law.
- (e) Within 30 days after the public hearing, the plan and zoning commission shall forward such application to the city council, together with the recommendation of the historic preservation commission. The plan and zoning commission may adopt the recommendation of the historic preservation commission as its own or may prepare a written recommendation of its own. The plan and zoning commission may limit itself to the proposed landmark or landmark site or may include modifications thereof. If the modification requires an additional public hearing, the plan and zoning commission shall hold such hearing before forwarding the application to the city council.
- (f) Upon receipt of such recommendation, the council shall schedule a public hearing to consider the recommendation at a specific place, date and time, not more than 30 days after such receipt, by giving notice as required by law.
- (g) The city council, after public hearing, may approve, approve with modification, or disapprove the recommendation of the plan and zoning commission by a majority vote of its membership. If the plan and zoning commission shall have failed to act within the time limit set forth in this section, the city council may, nevertheless, approve, approve with modification, or disapprove the proposed landmark or landmark site as originally proposed or modified by a majority vote of its membership.

II. ANALYSIS

- 1. Landmark Nomination Criteria:** A nomination must demonstrate that the subject building or site possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association and meets one or more of the following criterion.

- (1) Is significant in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture;
- (2) Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- (3) Is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- (4) 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 may lack individual distinction; or
- (5) Has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

The nomination suggests the site meets Criterion 1, 2 and 4. The W.W. Witmer House is a Colonial Revival residential structure constructed in 1905 for William Wirt Witmer. W.W. Witmer was a local newspaper publisher and civic leader in Des Moines. The house was designed by the architectural firm Liebke, Nourse & Rasmussen and represents the early twentieth-century high-style in Des Moines. Following its time as a

private residence, the W.W. Witmer House was the Iowa Governor's Mansion from 1949 to 1976, when the Iowa Governor's Mansion was moved to Terrace Hill. To this day the house retains a high degree of historic integrity as a contributing structure in the Owl's Head Local Historic District. The following information from the Witmer House Iowa Site Inventory sheet demonstrates how the Witmer House meets these criteria:

Criterion 1 - Significance in American History, Architecture, Archaeology, and Culture:

- The W.W. Witmer house is an example of a high-style Colonial Revival house in Iowa, designed by the renowned architectural firm of the time Liebke, Nourse & Rasmussen.
- As the founder of the *Evening Leader* and co-founder of the Western Newspaper Union, William Wirt Witmer was a central figure to Des Moines' civic and commercial development and the house represents his influence in Des Moines during this time.
- The home's architectural significance was documented in the *Western Architect* (Vol. 9, No. 2, February 1906) publication in 1906. The design and construction were recognized with a photograph and detailed description, demonstrating its influence beyond Iowa.
- In 1977, the house was documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey. And shortly after in 1984 the house was recognized in A Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia and Lee McAlester as an example of "Eclectic Houses: Colonial Revival design" (page 134), further reinforcing its architectural significance on both a local and national level.

Criterion 2 - Association with Events that Made a Significant Contribution to Broad Patterns of Our History:

- The W.W. Witmer house served as the Iowa Governor's Mansion from 1949 to 1976, providing the official residence for six Iowa governors. During this three-decade period, the house hosted many political and cultural officials and their associated events, helping to shape political, cultural and civic life statewide.
- The W.W. Witmer House is directly tied to Witmer's leadership in shaping Greenwood Park, Owl's Head, and surrounding neighborhoods of Des Moines. In 1880, Witmer began buying land west of Terrace Hill that would eventually become the area where his home was built. He continued to acquire land and lead other developments including "Greenwood Park", "Owl's Head", an area north of Woodland that was named "Middlesex", and another area north of Kingman Boulevard that was named "Wessex".

Criterion 4 – Embodies the Distinctive Characteristics of a Type, Period, or Method of Construction, Work of a Master, or High Artistic Values:

- As a contributing structure to the Owl's Head Local Historic District, the house stands out as a distinctive and recognizable landmark in the neighborhood and elevates the character of the surrounding area.
- The W.W. Witmer house is an outstanding and nationally recognized example of Colonial (Georgian) Revival architecture with defining features such as Ionic pilasters, a Palladian window, semicircular entrance porch, pedimented dormers, and finely detailed interior woodwork.
- Despite the renovations that occurred during its use as the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Association Headquarters (after its time as the Governor's Mansion), it retains a high level of historic integrity.

2. PlanDSM Creating Our Tomorrow: The PlanDSM Comprehensive Plan was approved on April 25, 2016. The proposed nomination is supported by numerous PlanDSM Goals and Policies including:

Land Use Goal 6

Recognize the value of Des Moines' historic building stock and landscapes and ensure their preservation.

LU33: Promote preservation, restoration, and reuse of historical structures and landmarks.

LU 35: Encourage expansion and establishment of National Historic Districts, local historic districts, and local landmarks.

Community Character and Neighborhood Goal 1

Embrace the distinct character offered in each of Des Moines' neighborhoods.

CCN1: Celebrate the City's culture and diversity through the creation of vibrant neighborhood nodes and corridors.

Community Character and Neighborhood Goal 4

Protect Des Moines' historic and cultural assets that contribute to neighborhood and community identity.

CCN25: Partner with the historic preservation community to promote Des Moines' rich history through education and outreach on historic structures, districts, and landscapes.

III. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the property "W.W. Witmer House" be designated as a local Landmark.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

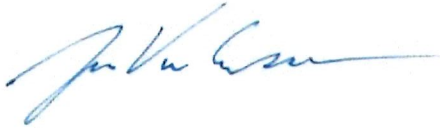
Leah Rudolphi asked if any member of the public or commission desired to speak on the item. No one requested to speak.

COMMISSION ACTION

Emily Webb made motion for approval that the property "W.W. Witmer House" be designated as a local Landmark.

THE VOTE: 9-0 (Chris Draper had not yet arrived)

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jason Van Essen".

Jason Van Essen, AICP
Planning & Urban Design Administrator

JMV:mrw

Historic Preservation Commission

Meeting Minutes- September 17, 2025

HPC PARTICIPANTS: Patricia Barry, John Beard, Ryan Bergman, Martha Green, Kathy Hellstern, Evan Shaw, and York A. Taenzer.

HPC ABSENT: Tiffany Allison, Ryan Ellsworth, Chad Nelson, Ann Schmid and Timothy Waddell.

STAFF PARTICIPANTS: Jacob Couppee, Stacey Hanley, and Jason Van Essen.

PUBLIC HEARING ITEMS

Item 1

Request from John Beard (owner) represented by Jack Porter (applicant) to nominate the W.W. Witmer House, located at 2900 Grand Avenue, as a Local Landmark.

STAFF REPORT TO THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

The subject property measures 194 feet by 340 feet. It contains a 2 1/2-story house built circa 1906 and a garage built circa 1975 according to the Polk County Assessor webpage. The property is located on the southwest corner of the Grand Avenue and 29th Street Intersection.

II. APPLICABLE SECTIONS OF THE CITY CODE

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The Historic Preservation Commission's recommendation will be forwarded to the Plan and Zoning Commission and the City Council for review in accordance with Section 58-60 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance. The Historic Preservation Commission and the Plan and Zoning Commission are recommending bodies in this process. The decision to designate a property or site as a local Landmark is made by the City Council.

If the property is designated as a Landmark then any future alteration, new construction, or demolition would be subject to review by the Historic Preservation Commission.

III. ANALYSIS

A nomination must demonstrate that the subject building or site possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association and meets one or more of the following criterion.

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Criterion 2 - Association with Events that Made a Significant Contribution to Broad Patterns of Our History:

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- Despite the renovations that occurred during its use as the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Association Headquarters (after its time as the Governor's Mansion), it retains a high level of historic integrity.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the property at 2900 Grand Avenue, locally known as the W.W. Witmer House, be designated as a local Landmark.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Stacey Hanley presented the staff report and recommendation.

Jack Porter, 815 18th Street, spoke in support of the recommendation that the home at 2900 Grand Avenue be designated a local landmark.

CHAIRPERSON OPENED PUBLIC HEARING

Commissioner Taenzer asked if any member of the public or commission desired to speak on the item. No one requested to speak.

CHAIRPERSON CLOSED PUBLIC HEARING

COMMISSION ACTION

Commissioner Barry made motion for approval that the property at 2900 Grand Avenue, locally known as the W.W. Witmer House, be designated as a local Landmark.

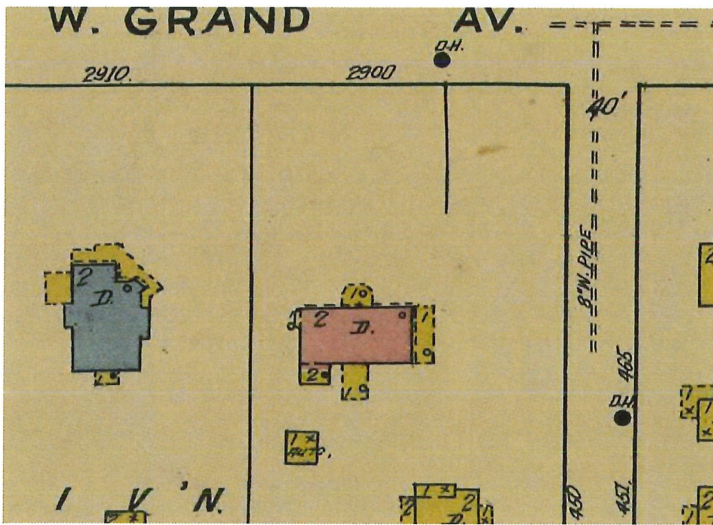
Motion was seconded by Commissioner Shaw.

THE VOTE: 5-0-2 (John Beard and Martha Green abstained)

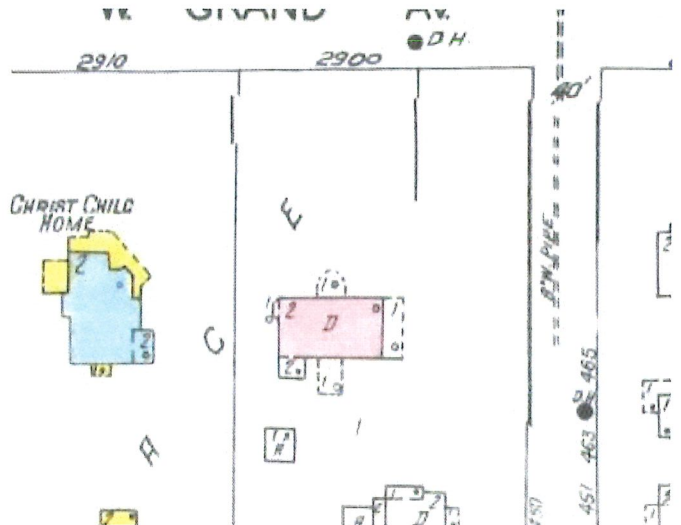


Disclaimer: This map is approximate and may not be complete.
City assumes no liability for accuracy. Consult sources listed to verify information. Sources: City of Des Moines

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SANBORN MAP 1920



SANBORN MAP 1957



WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

all photos by Jack C. Porter
unless noted otherwise



Photo 17: North façade and entry driveway, looking south

WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

all photos by Jack C. Porter
unless noted otherwise



Photo 21: Front facade, looking sw

WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

all photos by Jack C. Porter
unless noted otherwise



Photo 22: East faced, looking west.

WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

all photos by Jack C. Porter
unless noted otherwise



Photo 2: South elevation, looking north

WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

all photos by Jack C. Porter
unless noted otherwise



Photo 3: South elevation, looking NW

WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

all photos by Jack C. Porter
unless noted otherwise



Photo 12: West elevation, looking east.

WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

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Photo 13: West elevation showing bay window, looking east.

WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

all photos by Jack C. Porter
unless noted otherwise



Photo 9: Non-contributing garage, looking south

WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

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Photo 8: Non-contributing garage. Looking west

Criterion 1 – Significance in American History, Architecture, Archaeology, and Culture:

- The W.W. Witmer house is an example of a high-style Colonial Revival house in Iowa, designed by the renowned architectural firm of the time Liebke, Nourse & Rasmussen.
- As the founder of the *Evening Leader* and co-founder of the Western Newspaper Union, William Wirt Witmer was a central figure to Des Moines' civic and commercial development and the house represents his influence in Des Moines during this time.
- The home's architectural significance was documented in the *Western Architect* (Vol. 9, No. 2, February 1906) publication in 1906. The design and construction were recognized with a photograph and detailed description, demonstrating its influence beyond Iowa.
- In 1977, the house was documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey. And shortly after in 1984 the house was recognized in A Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia and Lee McAlester as an example of "Eclectic Houses: Colonial Revival design" (page 334), further reinforcing its architectural significance on both a local and national level.

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CENTERED GABLE

1. Buffalo, New York; ca. 1900. Harrover House. Centered gables that cover three ranks of window or door openings (here and in Figure 8) are less common than those that are only one or two ranks wide.

2. Dallas, Texas; 1938. Lincoln House. The simplicity of detailing on this house is typical of examples from the 1930s and '40s.

3. Buffalo, New York; 1920s.

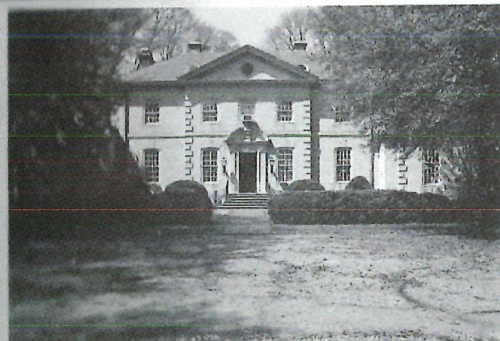
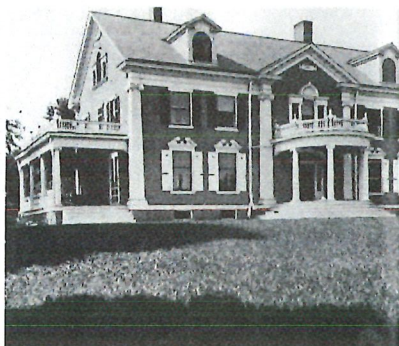
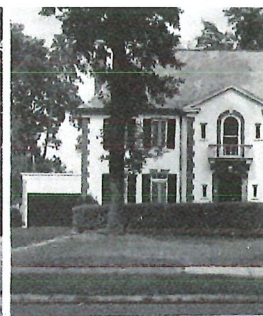
4. Madison, Wisconsin; 1896. Ely House.

5. Cleveland, Ohio; 1910s. The open overhanging eaves and the entry porch with trellised roof are borrowed from the Craftsman movement.

6. Buffalo, New York; 1910s. Note the fine detailing: the entrance with a rounded door, the sidelights without fanlight, the wide classical pediment, the Palladian and bay windows; and the carefully executed dormers.

7. Des Moines, Iowa; 1905. W. W. Witmer House; Liebke, Nourse and Rasmussen, architects. Note the first-story windows crowned with broken pediments (see also Figure 4). Although common above the main entrance, such pediments became rare on windows and dormers after about 1910.

8. Raleigh, North Carolina; 1935. Tatton Hall; William Lawrence Bottomley, architect. A five-ranked central block is flanked by one-story wings (obscured by trees and shadows in the photograph) in this landmark example.



WW Witmer House
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50312

Landmarks Application
Current Photos

all photos by Jack C. Porter
unless noted otherwise



RESIDENCE OF W. W. WITMER, DES MOINES, IOWA
LIEBER, NOURSE AND RASMUSSEN, ARCHITECTS

Historic Photo: Front façade, looking south
Western Architect, 1906

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

INDEX TO PHOTOGRAPHS

W.W. Witmer House (Iowa Girls Highschool Athletic Association)
2900 Grand Ave.
Des Moines
Polk County
Iowa

HABS No. IA-104

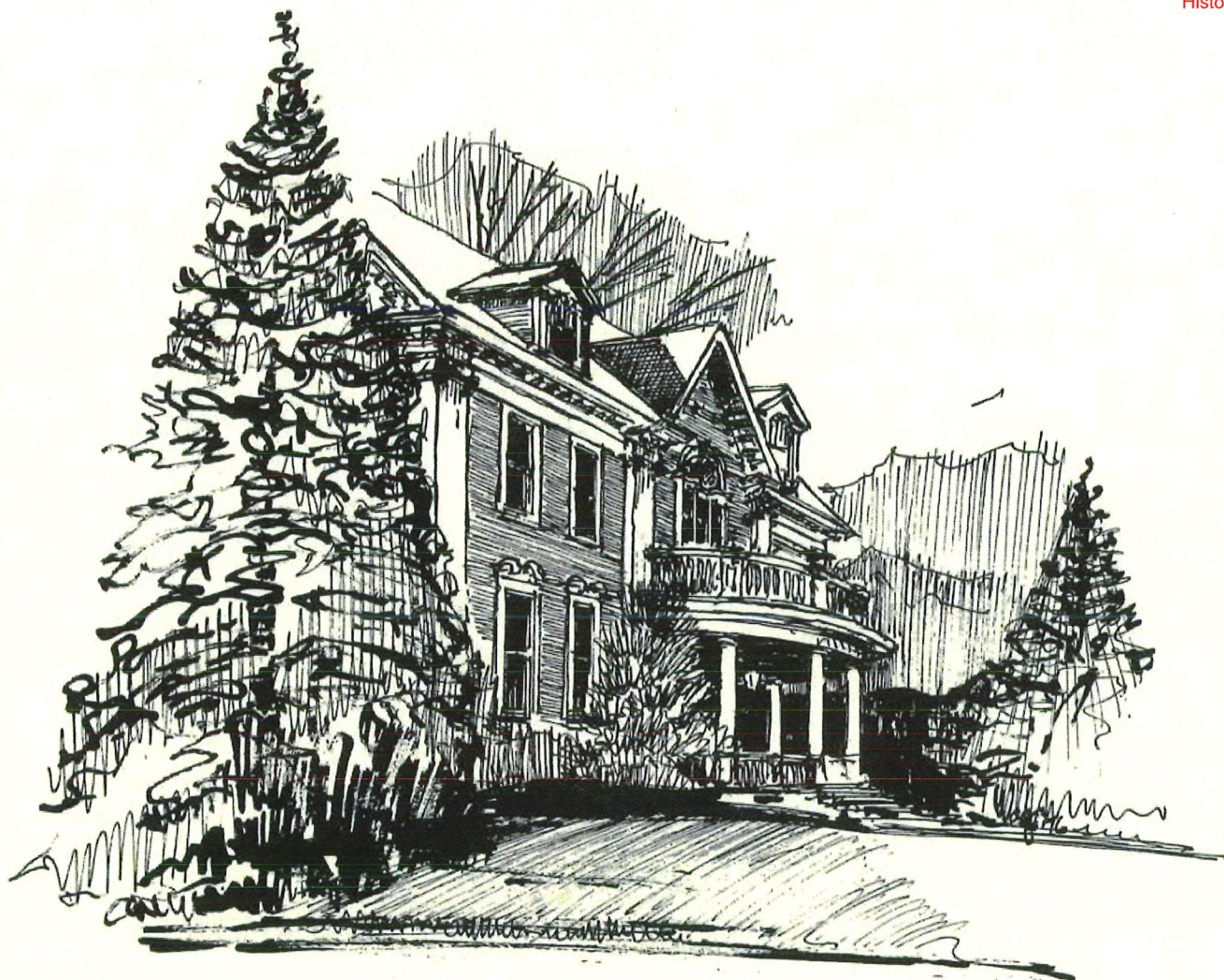
Documentation: I photocopy (1906)
I data page (1980)

IA-I04-1 Photocopy of photo from Western Architect, Vol. 9, No. 2, February
1906, noted on page 24. FRONT ELEVATION

Criterion 2 – Association with Events that Made a Significant Contribution to Broad Patterns of Our History:

- The W.W. Witmer house served as the Iowa Governor's Mansion from 1949 to 1976, providing the official residence for six Iowa governors. During this three-decade period, the house hosted many political and cultural officials and their associated events, helping to shape political, cultural and civic life statewide.
- The W.W. Witmer House is directly tied to Witmer's leadership in shaping Greenwood Park, Owl's Head, and surrounding neighborhoods of Des Moines. In 1880, Witmer began buying land west of Terrace Hill that would eventually become the area where his home was built. He continued to acquire land and lead other developments including "Greenwood Park", "Owl's Head", an area north of Woodland that was named "Middlesex", and another area north of Kingman Boulevard that was named "Wessex".

William Wagner
Historical Sketch



THE OLD GOVERNOR'S MANSION - 2900 Grand Avenue - Des Moines

POLK, CO. IA.



From the Des Moines Register, October 1958

Captioned, "Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, in Des Moines for United Nations Week, meets Esther Ruben, 8, and her mother, Mrs. Abe Ruben, of Burlington, Tuesday at a reception in the governor's mansion." Gov. and Mrs. Herschel Loveless are at Mrs. Roosevelt's right.



From the Des Moines Register, July 1969

Captioned, "Randi Ray performs on a trampoline behind the governor's residence in July 1969, as her sisters Lu Ann (left) and Vicki wait their turn.

Criterion 4 – Embodies the Distinctive Characteristics of a Type, Period, or Method of Construction, Work of a Master, or High Artistic Values:

- As a contributing structure to the Owl's Head Local Historic District, the house stands out as a distinctive and recognizable landmark in the neighborhood and elevates the character of the surrounding area.
- The W.W. Witmer house is an outstanding and nationally recognized example of Colonial (Georgian) Revival architecture with defining features such as Ionic pilasters, a Palladian window, semicircular entrance porch, pedimented dormers, and finely detailed interior woodwork.
- Despite the renovations that occurred during its use as the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Association Headquarters (after its time as the Governor's Mansion), it retains a high level of historic integrity.

Landmark Nomination Form

IDENTIFICATION:

SITE NAME WW Witmer House

LEGAL DESCRIPTION N250 F LOT 1 Langan Place (Pierce's sub-division)

OWNER(S) NAME John M. Beard

OWNER(S) SIGNATURE *John M. Beard*
(signed owner's letter of support or petition can be attached in lieu of signature here)

OWNER(S) ADDRESS 2900 Grand Avenue Des Moines Iowa 50312
(street address) (city) (state) (zip)

CATEGORY:

STRUCTURAL/ARCHITECTURAL ☒ **LANDSCAPE** ☐ **ARCHEOLOGICAL** ☐
COMPONENTS _____

USE (present) Single Family (past) Governors of Iowa residence

DESCRIPTION:

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION 1905 **ARCHITECT/BUILDER** Liebke Nourse and Rasmussen Architects

BUILDING TYPE:

Single-family dwelling ☒ Industrial ☐ Other institutional ☐ Religious ☐
Multiple-family dwelling ☐ Educational ☐ Public ☐ Agricultural ☐
Commercial ☐

EXTERIOR WALLS: clapboard ☒ stone ☐ brick ☒ board and batten ☐ shingles ☐
stucco ☐ other ☐

STRUCTURAL SYSTEM: wood frame with interlocking joints ☐ masonry load-bearing walls ☒
wood frame with light members (balloon frame) ☐ iron frame ☐ steel frame with curtain walls ☐
reinforced concrete ☐ other ☐

CONDITION: excellent ☒ good ☐ fair ☐ deteriorated ☐

INTEGRITY: original site ☒ moved--if so, when ☐
from where ☐

Information on alterations, additions (with dates & architect, if known) and any other notable features of building/site: 1948-REHAB FOR THE STATE OF IOWA GOVERNOR'S MANSION.

BECKS BORN ENG & ARCH. / 1977-REHAB FOR THE IOWA GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ASSOC.
2012- JOHN BEARD. BROWN HEAVY BOCIS, ARCH. ENG. PLNG. CR.

RELATED OUTBUILDINGS AND PROPERTY: barn ☐ other farm structures ☐ carriage house ☐
☐ garage ☒ privy ☐ other ☐

SURROUNDINGS OF THE SITE: open land ☒ woodland ☐ scattered outbuildings ☐
commercial ☐ industrial ☐ residential ☒ densely built-up ☐ other ☐

Prepared by Jack C. Porter

Date 4 August 2025

Address 815 18th Street Des Moines, IA 50314-1102

Telephone (515-681-2668) Email (jackcporter46@gmail.com)

Organization ☐

SIGNIFICANCE: (Indicate all sources of information for all statements)

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

See attached Iowa Site Inventory form.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

See attached Iowa Site Inventory form

SOURCES (for primary and secondary sources give complete facts of publication: author, title, place of publication, date, etc.):

7. Narrative Description

Polk County land transfer records indicate the William Wirt Witmer family purchased the N240 FT, lot 1, Langan Place (Pierce's sub-division) in 1880, however the Witmers lived on the NW corner of 18th and Center Steet (now part of the Sherman Hill Historic District) according to the 1880 US Census. William was 36, Marly was 34 and their daughter Mabel was 2 at that time. According to an story about the Witmer House by Kent Carlson in City View in November 2016, "WW was born in April 1843 in Pennsylvania, served in the Civil War and was admitted to the in January 1867. In November 1871 he married Mary Stein in Philadelphia. In 1868, they moved to Des Moines from Muscatine and founded the "Evening Leader" and served as it's editor for 10 years. In 1877, WW expanded the "Ready Prints" newspaper and expanded into the Western Newspaper Union with offices in Omaha, Kansas City, and St. Paul. By 1880, WW started buying property east of Terrace Hill Manion in a large area of land soon to be incorporated as "Greenwood Park" and labeled his development "Owl's Head" and adjacent area as "Middlesex" and another as "Wessex". In 1890, these areas and others were incorporated into the City of Des Moines.

WW also partnered with Daniel O. Eshbaugh and Wilber F. Bartlett to form "New England Loan and Trust Company". To continue, WW partnered with George Maish (a property individually listed on the National Register and located on the NE corner of 17th and Center in the Sherman Hill Historic District) and Frank Risely to build Savery Hotel which opened in 1888. In WW became a partner in the Eurika Coal and Mining, which was in "Sevastopol". About c. 1900, WW commission the design services of the local architectural firm of Liebbe, Nourse, and Rasmussen to design the house now located at 2900 Grand Avenue, which was completed in 1905. (1)

WW passed away on November 18, 1916, and Mary passed away on September 2, 1921. Their daughters Mable Tone and Hellen Nollen inherited the property. In 1922, Mabel transferred her share of the property to her sister Hellen. Helen passed away in 1940. In 1947, the property was sold to the State of Iowa to used as the governor's Des Moines residence. The first Governor to live in the home was William Beardsley. Gov. Beardsley was followed by Leo Elton, Herschel C. Loveless, Norman Erbe, Herold Hughs, and finally Robert D. Ray. In 1977, the property was no longer to be used as the Des Moines residence as the State of Iowa purchased Terrace Hill to serve as the Iowa Governor's official residence and was sold to the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Association for their administrative office. In 2012, the Witmer house was purchased by its current owner, John Beard.

The WW Witmer house is a contributing structure in the Owl's Head Historic District. This significant example of classic revival architecture was documented in 1906 when a photo was published in Western Architect, Vol, 9, No. 2, February 1906 noted on page 24. In 1977, Wesley L. Shank, The Iowa Catalog, Historic American Building Survey on pages 99 and 104, which stated:

"Witmer, WW. House (Old Governor's Mansion, now Iowa Girls High School Athletic Association) (IA-104) (Fig.M-14) 2900 Grand Ave.

Red brick with wooden trim, six-bay front, two-and-a-half stories, gable roof with pedimented dormers, Ionic pilasters, central pedimented pavilion with fan lighted entrance and Palladian window, semicircular entrance porch, rectangle side porch, both porches are one-story with Ionic columns and balustrades, broken pediments above the first floor front windows, Georgian Revival style. Built in 1905, Liebbe, Nourse, and Rasmussen architects. Served as Governor's mansion from 11949 to 1976. 1 ext. photocopy (1906)"

In addition, the WW Witmer house is included in the A Field Guide to American Houses, Viginia and Lee McAllister (1984) on 134 as an example of *Eclectic Houses*: Colonial Revival design.

The floor pattern has not changed to a great degree, however, some of the character defining spaces appear to have been altered to accommodate the use of the home by the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Association (IGHSA) for their administrative offices. Thankfully the changes did not damage the overall design of the original home. Those changes to create offices, conference rooms, etc. have been removed by the present owner with little or no negative effect on the historic character of the home. The first-floor entry is a vestibule with a small closet. Entry is dominated by an original classic stairway up to the second floor, which can be closed off by sliding doors on the east and west adjoining rooms. To the east there is a large parlor and to the west there is the large dining room. To the south of the parlor is a large inner parlor (originally the library). A full-depth enclosed porch along the east side of the home which can be entered from either room. The dining room is dominated by a curved wall to the west and accessed from a door to the adjoining kitchen and butler's pantry to the south.

The second floor living spaces are accessible from an east/west corridor. Two large bedrooms are to the east and two additional large bedrooms to the west. Each set of bedrooms are separated by a bathroom. The SW bedroom has an enclosed sleeping porch. The west wing can be closed off with a sliding door for privacy. The second floor also has a maid stairway on the south side adjacent to the main stairway. A simpler stairway behind the grand stairway provides access to the third floor. The third floor has been recently remodeled to open the main room up for use as a party room. A two bedroom and one bathroom are accessed to the east.

Beside the service stairway, which is continuous from the attic level, an interesting stairway with similar railing and spindle details to the grand stairway extends down this level from the first level. This stairway hint that perhaps the original ballroom/party room may have been located at this level? However, this level is primarily used for the support and utility purposed for the Master and Mistress of the house. Speculation suggests the maid's living quarters were also located on this level.

Character defining features include:

- Original doors, window sash and trim where they exist are in good to excellent condition.
- Much of the original hardware exists.
- Interior T&G wood flooring (bathrooms, butler's pantry and kitchen have been refloored with tile) range from good to excellent condition.
- Plaster walls on wood lath and ceilings are in good to excellent condition. Some of the visible walls and ceilings have been papered. The attic walls and ceiling were recently remodeled using drywall and painted.
- Fireplace and mantel (mantel and hearth appear to have been slightly altered by removing some of the decorative detailing).
- Bay window on first level only.
- Sliding doors
- Grand Stairway between first and second level.

8. Statement of Significance.

W.W. Witmer House
2900 Grand Avenue
Des Moines, IA. 50312-4205

ISIF

Wednesday, June 25, 2025

18

The WW Witmer house is nationally recognized as a classic example of Colonial (Georgian) Revival style of eclectic Houses as documented by Virginia and Lee McCallister. The house at 2900 Grand Avenue is located on the SW corner of 28th and Grand Avenue. in the Owls Head Historic District of Des Moines, Iowa. First platted prior to 1880. WW Witmer bought the north 240 feet of Lot 1, Langan Place which was part of Pierce's Sub-division. Built in 1905, the design of the house was included in the Western Architect February 1906 issue and ultimately recorded in the HABS survey of 1977. The 1901 and 1920 Sanborn maps illustrate the development of this area previously known as the city of Owls Head. The house has been rated as a contributing structure to the Owls Head Hill Historic District.

In 1947 the State of Iowa purchased the property to become the Des Moines Governor's residence to serve as their home, host formal dinners for dignitaries, and support staff for their social functions. Six Governors lived in the home starting with William Beardsley and ending with Robert D. Ray in 1976. In 1977, the property was sold to the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Association.

The WW Witmer house is a contributing structure in the Owl's Head Historic District. This significant example of classic revival architecture was documented in 1906 when a photo was published in Western Architect. In 1977, Wesley L. Shank, The Iowa Catalog, Historic American Building Survey, listed the home as an example of Georgian Classic Revival architecture and the home was survey in HABS. Built in 1905, Liebbe, Nourse, and Rasmussen architects. Served as Governor's mansion from 11949 to 1976. In addition, the WW Witmer house is included in the A Field Guide to American Houses, Virginia and Lee McAllister as an example of *Eclectic Houses*: Colonial Revival design.